

2006

## A marriage of convenience: Batista and the Communists, 1933 - 1944

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A Marriage of Convenience: Batista and the Communists, 1933 – 1944

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of History  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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Date of Approval:  
July 21, 2006

Keywords: cuba, latin america, communism, labor, pre- revolutionary  
(republican) period

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## A Marriage of Convenience: Batista and the Communists, 1933 – 1944

C. Clayton Hollenkamp

### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between Fulgencio Batista and the Communist Party of Cuba. At odds during the first several years of Batista's rule, when strikes and repression were the topics of the day, the two sides eventually saw in each other a means to an end. In efforts to understand the Cuban Revolution of the late 1950's, historians often portray Batista as a dictatorial puppet of American business and policy. Contrary to this image, in his first regime (1934 until 1944), Batista presided over the creation of a nominal constitutional democracy. To do this he needed the support and good conduct of organized labor, in which the Communists could be a powerful force.

In 1935 the Communist Party International, based in Moscow, adopted a shift in tactics. So as to combat fascism, the Party turned away from its traditionally isolationist line. It sought to make alliances with like-minded groups and wanted to serve in the government. In mid-1938 an agreement was reached between Batista and Party heads from which sprang a mutually beneficial alliance lasting through the first *batistato*. The relationship is often overlooked in Cuban historiography and many questions remain. To truly understand its significance we need more information as to origins, conditions, and consequences of the agreements. This paper explores the conditions on both sides, seeking to understand how and why the unlikely bedfellows came together. As well, it

traces the relationship until the end of Batista's term in 1944, focusing on the ebb and flow of support concerning major issues of the day, such as organized labor, the constitutional assembly, the election of 1940, and involvement in World War II. Finally, this study shows how the alliance with the Communist Party is a necessary point in a full understanding of Fulgencio Batista and the era.

## Introduction

In *History Will Absolve Me*, Fidel Castro delivered a scathing indictment of Fulgencio Batista. Defending his attack on the Moncada barracks on July 26, 1953, he charged that Batista's unconstitutional and dictatorial regime ignored the extreme suffering of the Cuban people. He described the plight of the population, claiming to struggle on behalf of the 700,000 Cubans without work, the 500,000 agricultural laborers who lived in barely inhabitable hovels, the 100,000 small farmers who lived and died on land that is not theirs, and the 60,000 young professionals and established businessmen who ready to enter the work force only to become weighted down by debt or find all doors closed to them by the oligarchy. He also criticized the lopsided distribution of wealth and the unequal dissemination of land in a nation that was still largely agricultural. Then, Castro revealed his planned "Revolutionary Laws" and changes he would make should his movement succeed. At the end of his statement, Castro took on a popular image among revolutionaries: the martyr. Confident that he acted for the benefit of the Cuban nation, Castro closed his discourse with "Condemn me. It does not matter. History will absolve me."<sup>1</sup>

In many ways, Fidel's assessment of the Batista government was on target. No one can deny the corruption in the bureaucracy nor the limitations placed on personal freedoms and constitutional guarantees. At the same time though, Castro carefully wove

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<sup>1</sup> Fidel Castro, *History Will Absolve Me: The Moncada Trial Defense Speech, Santiago de Cuba, October 16th, 1953* (London,: Cape, 1968) 101.

into his speech some exaggerations and sidestepped some issues for the sake of his own argument. A very noticeable example of a misrepresentation was Castro's portrayal of the *Auténtico* regimes that preceded Batista's military dictatorship. Castro described the previous regimes of Ramón Grau San Martín and Carlos Prío Socorrás as legitimate governments of "a republic. It had its constitution, its laws, its civil rights, a president, a congress, and law courts."<sup>2</sup> The presidents of Cuba from 1944 until Batista's coup d'état in March of 1952 were indeed constitutionally elected in what most historians agree were among the fairest elections in the history of the island. Moreover, Grau and Prío gave enough respect to Congress and the system of government outlined by the Constitution of 1940 to be considered within the bounds of that document. However, any further representation of the *Auténtico* years as just is clearly over-romanticism with the purpose of highlighting the abuses of the Batista regime. Hugh Thomas commented, "Grau turned his presidency into an orgy of theft, ill-disguised by emotional nationalistic speeches. He did more than any other single man to kill the hope of democratic practice in Cuba." Thomas had little better to say about Prío, noting only his cool, suave demeanor that Cubans later learned to distrust and his weakness for corruption.

The numbers Castro quoted when describing the situation of the population have at least one irregularity in them as well. Castro noted 500,000 agricultural laborers who lived in miserable circumstances. However, the 1953 census listed only 510,000 agricultural laborers in Cuba, 118,000 of which lived in destitute poverty.<sup>3</sup> One could easily overlook this statistical error as it is slight. But, minor as it is, the sympathetic assessment of the *Auténtico* regimes exemplified a most cherished and necessary weapon

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<sup>2</sup> Castro, 1-26.

<sup>3</sup> Hugh Thomas, *Cuba : Or, the Pursuit of Freedom* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1971) 759-63.

in the revolutionary's arsenal: the manipulation of history. Fulgencio Batista remains a caricature in Cuban historiography, demonized by the revolutionary left and ignored by the right. A recent biography by Frank Argote-Freyre, *Fulgencio Batista: From Revolutionary to Strongman*,<sup>4</sup> represents the first scholarly effort to appraise Batista. Much work remains to be done.

This paper will examine the first Batista regime with a particular eye on a facet of it that has been overlooked by *fidelistas* and *batistianos*, the symbiotic relationship between the Partido Comunista de Cuba (Communist Party of Cuba, PCC) and the Batista government. Because of the sometimes strange unraveling of history, neither those sympathetic nor those in opposition to the Revolution are happy to note the agreement made between the two in 1938. However, it was highly significant and was a principal factor in creating democracy in Cuba.

This work will chronicle the evolution of the relationship between the PCC and Batista from its origins until 1944, the end of Batista's presidential term. In the early years, hostilities between the two were rampant. The PCC played a part in much of the opposition to the government. This paper will explore the conditions on both sides that allowed an agreement in 1938. This study will continue through 1944 so as to examine how the agreement between Batista and the communists played out. However, by ending the examination with the conclusion of Batista's term as the constitutionally elected president of Cuba and not including the 1950's, this study will isolate him from the political controversy that overwhelmed him and the historiography.

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<sup>4</sup> Frank Argote-Freyre, "Fulgencio Batista : From Revolutionary to Strongman," Thesis (Ph. D.), Rutgers University, 2004.



Little is known about the actual terms of the *entente cordial*. No written document was signed, and it is likely that only those at the critical meeting in the summer of 1938 knew the exact provisions of the arrangement. By examining the working relationship from 1938 until 1944, one can deduce the terms of the agreement. As well, this paper will set forth the argument that Batista's overthrow of Grau was a continuation and not a frustration of the lofty goals of 1933. While explaining the evolution of the pact between Batista and the PCC, this paper will also analyze the extent of social welfare programs and legislation he enacted during his time in power. Batista's often forgotten social record made him a viable ally in the eyes of the PCC, and it suggests that Batista was not the counter-revolutionary as he is represented in many histories of the era.

## Review of Relevant Literature

This paper takes as its point of departure a phenomenon first noted by Karl Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Marx noted how societies on the doorstep of great change need constant reassurances that their action is somehow consistent with the past. Marx commented: “Just when men seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things... they anxiously conjure up spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries, and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language.”<sup>5</sup> Louis A. Pérez Jr. later applied Marx’s assertion to Cuban history. Pérez recognized the Revolutionary Government’s use of history as a tool of legitimization in his article “In Service of the Revolution: Two Decades of Cuban Historiography, 1959-1979”. He posited that “redefining the future requires reconsidering the past.” When a revolution succeeds, new leaders must identify themselves with national heroes and distance themselves from the deeds of those whom they deposed. In order to create a historical context for his revolution Castro had to co-opt, as symbols, men of the distant past such as Martí, and disassociate himself from the recent past.<sup>6</sup>

Continuing in the trend, Pérez’s article, “History, Historiography and Cuban Studies: A Retrospective” in his compilation *Essays on Cuban History*, looked

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<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1994) 15-17.

<sup>6</sup> Louis A. Pérez Jr., “In Service of the Revolution: Two Decades of Cuban Historiography, 1959-1979,” *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 60. 1 (1980): 79-89.

specifically at the effect the revolution of 1959 had on the way historians interpreted events both after and before 1959. Pérez asserted that much of the history written after 1959 has been based on the assumption of the “essential historicity of the Revolution.” According to the author, historians felt no matter how much the Revolution seemed like a complete rupture with the past, it simply had to have its roots in history. In the efforts to explain the Revolution, historians interpreted all events in respect to it.

The author cited the importance of the Revolution in Cuban historiography, noting how so much of the post-1959 work done in the field is dedicated to its study. Because of this lightning rod quality possessed by the action of the 1950's, many of the principal players became remembered solely for their exploits in that turbulent era, so much so that they became foils for their respective character types. The counter-revolutionary and the guerilla fighter are archetypes that are, because of the historical process Pérez identified, easily associated with Batista and Castro. By the early 1960's, the leadership committed itself to a total break with the old order and all its institutions, beliefs, and symbols. Pérez rightly claims that the ascendancy of the revolutionary government created a new venue for revisionist histories. Themes previously shied away from in deference to the close relationship with the United States such as neo-colonialism, imperialism, and the pseudo-republic that existed under the Platt Amendment, took center stage and became the new vogue among historians.

Public policy and the media came together in an effort of political socialization that re-educated the Cuban people about their national past. The effort was ever-present, and evident in most forms of communication. Political rhetoric and school curricula reflected the new focus and spin on the past. Virtually all newspapers and magazines had

some column devoted to Cuban history. The magazine *Verde Olivo* featured two such sections called “Marchando con la Historia” and “Paginas de nuestra Historia.” The journal of the sugar industry, *Cuba Azucar*, included a regular section on the Cuban past named “Haciendo Historia,” a title nearly parodying itself, suggesting as much history is being constructed as is being related. The main organ of the Revolution, “*Granma*,” published a recurring column entitled “Que Fue la República,” which specifically recounted the corruption and abuses of the *ancien regime*. As well, the Cuban Film Institute (ICAIC) participated by creating films such as “Lucia,” “Viva La República,” and “El Otro Francisco.” These films recast the national past in powerful images laced with nationalistic ideals popular at the time.<sup>7</sup> By use of these devices, the Castro regime was able to equate itself with the figures of the distant past, especially José Martí, and castigate others found to be contrary to the revolution. The regime successfully characterized the recent past as a vice-laden era, sated with corruption and entirely under the influence of the exploitative Americans.

From the start of the Revolution, an obvious focus of ridicule was Fulgencio Batista. In *History Will Absolve Me* Castro takes every chance to attack Batista. At one point he called Batista “Monstrum Horrendum,” saying “he has not human entrails.” He accused Batista or his government of more than thirty crimes, including corruption and murder. As early as his 1953 trial Castro sought to paint Batista as a slave to personal gain and capable of atrocities in its acquisition. Castro recounted example after example

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<sup>7</sup> Louis A. Pérez Jr., *Essays on Cuban History: Historiography and Research* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995) 180.

of how the government robbed and brutally oppressed the population so as to satisfy the “great financial interests.”<sup>8</sup>

As it is a basic premise of this paper that the Revolution altered the methodologies of Cuban historiography, I intend to analyze the pre-revolutionary period on its own merit and not simply as the linear predecessor of the Revolution. This paper will seek to portray the actors as they were in the years under study without regards to the roles they eventually played during the insurrection of the late 1950’s.

Despite being aware of the Revolution’s impact on historiography, it seems that Pérez also fell victim to its influence. In his major works, *Cuba, Between Reform and Revolution*<sup>9</sup> and *Cuba and the U.S.: Ties of Singular Intimacy*,<sup>10</sup> Pérez’s view of Batista’s first regime is through a lens clouded by the failures of his second. In his treatment of the overthrow of the government of Ramón Grau San Martín in January 1934, for example, Pérez portrayed Batista as merely a tool of Sumner Welles, the representative of the American government in Havana. He argued that Batista came to oppose Grau primarily at the behest of Welles, who believed a change in government was imperative in order to maintain stability, a necessity for business interests.<sup>11</sup> The author speaks of no other factors in explaining the overthrow. He took a similar point of view in his work on relations between the U.S. and Cuba. It is certain that the Grau government could not have maintained its position for long without the recognition from Washington, but by taking away all initiative from Batista, the architect of the revolt that put Grau into

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<sup>8</sup> Castro, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Louis A. Pérez Jr., *Cuba : Between Reform and Revolution*, Latin American Histories, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Louis A. Pérez Jr., *Cuba and the United States : Ties of Singular Intimacy*, The United States and the Americas, 2nd ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Pérez, *Cuba : Between Reform and Revolution* 275.

power, Pérez made him into the American puppet that we remember from his second regime.

A similar case can be made concerning Pérez's comments about Batista's brutality. While it is not the purpose of this study to revise or apologize for Batista's image, Pérez's treatment of these issues should be examined. Two events that are often cited as examples of brutality during the first *batistato* are the repression of the strike of March 1935 and the assassination of Antonio Guiteras. Pérez connected these two issues, claiming that Guiteras's assassination was punishment for his role in inciting the strike two months earlier. Pérez noted the many casualties of the repression of the strike by the police and the killing of Guiteras by the army. However, his telling of the facts implied that Batista was directly responsible for both acts, failing to mention that others might have played a part in the action. President Mendieta declared martial law on Havana and Colonel Jose Eleutario Pedraza was on the ground in command of the force of strikebreakers.<sup>12</sup> Batista certainly wielded enough power to influence Mendieta and Pedraza. However, he was not the sole actor in the event. Concerning the death of Guiteras, an article in the magazine *Bohemia*, a longtime critic of the regime, claimed Batista sent Colonel Ignacio Galindez to offer Guiteras safe passage to Havana and out of the country, but he was not in time as other army units found him first. Guiteras and his men came out firing, and he was killed in the fray.<sup>13</sup>

Most important for the purposes of this study, Pérez dedicated very little space to the mutual support between the Communist Party and Batista. In Batista's second term he was a firm anti-communist, but in his first he collaborated with the PCC. Pérez noted

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<sup>12</sup> Mario Riera Hernández, *Un Presidente Constructivo*, (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1966) 17-18.

<sup>13</sup> Jorge Quintana, *Bohemia* August 25, 1946: 32.

only the peace made in 1937 and the entrance of the PCC into electoral politics. He noted that membership increased in the years leading up to 1944 and that the PCC gained a foothold in the government.<sup>14</sup> However, he fell far short of recognizing the true significance of the agreement between Batista and the group, an agreement that led to the support of many Batista policies by the PCC and *vice versa*.

All in all, it seems that Louis Pérez failed to heed his own warnings about the effect the Cuban Revolution has on history. In both of his texts, he viewed the Batista of the 1930's as the brutal American puppet that he became in the 1950's. His interpretation, like many others, sought to shape the Cuban past in such a way that Batista fulfilled the historic function of the evil autocrat. In this process, much of the complexity and fullness of the pre-revolutionary era was sacrificed, and Batista is understood as a one-dimensional figure.

The proposition that the Revolution was the product of the times before it cannot be argued. It would be silly to claim that it had no historical basis. However, this paper will avoid the approach taken by Ramón Eduardo Ruiz in his work *Cuba: The Making of a Revolution*.<sup>15</sup> In his work the author took the position that the Revolution of 1959 was the result of a process that began nearly one-hundred years earlier during the Ten Years War (1868-1878) and gained steam until it reached its climax in the late 1950's. He examined the Cuban nationalism that had its beginning in the 1860's and was a motivating factor in the War for Cuban Independence. As well, Ruiz designated a chapter to understand José Martí and his role in the war effort. In later chapters Ruiz

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<sup>14</sup> Pérez, *Cuba : Between Reform and Revolution* 277.

<sup>15</sup> Ramón Eduardo Ruiz, *Cuba; the Making of a Revolution* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1968).

explored the Revolution of 1933, the Batista and *Auténtico* years and the Revolution of 1959.

While Pérez's argument was shaped by the Revolution only implicitly by approaching its antecedents in terms of their consequence on the Revolution, Ruiz immediately made the reader aware of this bias that is seen throughout the book. A fine example is his treatment of the Revolution of 1933 and the Batista era. From early on, Ruiz noted the growth of anti-Americanism beginning with José Martí, who opposed American intervention in the war for independence as it might compromise Cuban sovereignty. He was posthumously proven right by the establishment of the Platt Amendment in 1902. As economic and military intervention on the part of the United States expanded through the first third of the twentieth century, anti-U.S. sentiment grew also. The chapters Ruiz dedicated to what he called the "second historical cycle," from 1933 until 1958, he named *The Lost Opportunity* and *The Return of the Old Order*. According to his interpretation, the overthrow of the Grau regime that lasted some 130 days frustrated the chance Cuba had to distance itself from the United States. In his next chapter Ruiz noted how many of the same characters involved in politics before 1933 returned afterwards, and because of this, the reliance on the United States remained.<sup>16</sup>

By pointing out the anti-Americanism already in existence in the 1930's, he was able to refer to it in the 1950's as a leading cause of the Revolution. However, in making his case for the American domination of the economy and the repression handed down by the American-puppet leaders, Ruiz gave less significance to the abrogation of the Platt Amendment and reforms demanded by Grau and enacted by Batista. He also noted the

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<sup>16</sup> Ruiz, 77-114.



sad situation of the poor in Cuba but failed to note the newfound power of organized labor in the 1930's. Finally, he failed to remember that foreign ownership of the sugar industry declined sharply long before the Castro regime took hold.<sup>17</sup> He claimed that the pattern of foreign domination continued. This interpretation is a consequence of the biases used in examining the Revolution. A reformist Batista does not coalesce well with the image Ruiz painted of the Batista of the 1950's.

Jorge I. Domínguez's study of the Cuban Revolution, *Cuba: Order and Revolution*,<sup>18</sup> is a thoroughly empirical examination of changes in politics and society of modern Cuba. Domínguez separated Cuban history into three broad eras, 1902 until 1933, 1934 until 1958, and 1959 until 1978, the year the book was published. He outlined the political systems that operated during the first two eras in the early chapters of his work. He placed considerable emphasis on the shift in American policy from imperialism to hegemony. The lack of willingness to land troops and the distancing from daily politics are two examples of results of the new relationship that existed between the United States and those nations whose fortunes rose and fell with the approval of the American government.<sup>19</sup>

The majority of his work is spent discussing the years after the revolution of 1959. Domínguez attributed Batista's fall and the rise of Castro to the widely held belief that the Batista government was illegitimate, corrupt and, because of Batista's pursuit of

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<sup>17</sup> John E. Fagg. Rev. of "Cuba: The Making of a Revolution." *Hispanic American Historical Review* 49.3 (1969): 570-572.

<sup>18</sup> Jorge I. Domínguez, *Cuba : Order and Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978).

<sup>19</sup> Domínguez, 77-91.

foreign investment, increasingly indifferent to Cuban ideals of nationalism.<sup>20</sup>

Domínguez's perception and interpretation of the era do not seem to be skewed by the Revolution. Where Pérez emphasized either Batista's agency or lack thereof in certain situations, Domínguez viewed Batista as a powerbroker working between various factions in the government. In his analysis of the years from 1933 until 1945, Domínguez gave great weight to the power wielded by interest groups. He commented that where as interest groups held sway under previous administrations, acting as lobbyists on the fringes of government, under the Batista regime, interest groups took active part in the making of policy.<sup>21</sup>

As an example of how this process worked, the author cited the interplay between the *colonos* and the *hacendados* on one side and organized labor on the other. As these entities gained political power through patronage, loyalty, and corruption they influenced and sometimes indeed crafted the laws that pertained to their particular sphere; the *Colonos* wrote sugar legislation and organized labor debated and implemented labor legislation. The obvious confluence of these two areas often brought on tensions and impediments that had to be resolved. Domínguez claimed it was the Batista's job to act as a mediator between two opposing factions. This balancing act had to be performed in between other sectors as well, not only in connection with sugar legislation.

Because organized labor held stakes in so many different areas of the economy and population, Domínguez says it was of special importance, leading to the relationship that blossomed between Batista and the PCC. The author did not explore the agreement in detail but did note its significance. Labor had always been a source of irritation for

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<sup>20</sup> Domínguez, 110-33

<sup>21</sup> Domínguez, 84-88.

Batista as the early years of his rule, 1933 until 1936, were rife with politically and economically incited work stoppages. By 1937, both sides were in need of something the other had. The communists wanted access to power, and Batista could grant it. Batista needed the peace and support that could be delivered unto him if the Communist Party was legalized and allowed to consolidate organized labor. The two unlikely bedfellows came together in a pact in the spring of 1938. The possible terms of the agreement will be discussed later, but the significance resided in the Communists' new and central role in governance and the support given Batista by organized labor, the largest single interest group on the island. Domínguez claimed that this cooperation was a key step towards the creation of a viable political system representing a majority of the population.<sup>22</sup>

In summary, Jorge Domínguez viewed Fulgencio Batista not as an all-powerful military strongman ruling the island with a heavy hand, but as a cog, albeit the principal cog, in a larger Cuban political machine. His interpretation of Batista's role in the struggles between capital and labor reinforced the perception of him as a powerbroker. Further strengthening this point is his treatment of the interaction between Batista and the "puppet" presidents where the author gave them much more agency and responsibility than other historians have.<sup>23</sup> Domínguez realized that Batista was a man among men. The others with whom Batista ran the government were often rich and powerful and from old families, some were even sons of the patriots of 1902. It is terribly unlikely that Fulgencio Batista, a man of meager beginnings, a mere sergeant until 1933, could have immediately commanded total respect and authority from such old-guard patricians. By interpreting Batista as a powerbroker between the various factions, Domínguez exhibited

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<sup>22</sup> Domínguez, 96.

<sup>23</sup> Domínguez, 78.

the give and take in Cuban politics and argued against the image of Batista as all-powerful. Further, he analyzed Batista on his own terms in the 1930's, not as the caricatured figure later created by the revolutionaries. This study will use a similar methodology as it allows a fuller understanding of the era.

Another point on which this analysis will be based was succinctly noted by Robert Whitney in his work, *State and Revolution in Cuba: Mass Mobilization and Political Change 1920-1940*.<sup>24</sup> In his work he recognized how the historian's choice of endpoint affects the way in which the author crafts the narrative. Certain ideas and events gain and lose importance as the study unfolds. To exemplify this notion, he pointed to the body of Cuban historians who view the island's past simply as a prelude to the insurrection of 1952-1959. Whitney noted how an interpretation of that sort tends to cast the shadow of the Revolution back upon the years that preceded it, obscuring certain factors in an effort to understand others. By ending his study in 1940 with the drafting of the constitution and Batista's election to the presidency, Whitney allowed himself to interpret the years of his concern in a context different from that of others.

For example, when commenting on the Revolution of 1933, many historians use words such as "failed" or "frustrated." That interpretation has been propagated by revolutionaries who wish to claim descent from a failed social revolution. It is Whitney's contention, and that of this study, that the 1934 overthrow of the Grau regime did not mark a return to the old order, but instead the beginning of a transition period from oligarchic rule to mass political participation.

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Whitney, *State and Revolution in Cuba : Mass Mobilization and Political Change, 1920-1940*, Envisioning Cuba (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

As the proletarianization of urban and rural workers persisted, the influence of *caudillos*, who, while often capitalist and entrepreneurial still exerted “extra-economic” power as a result of personal authority, reputation, and loyalty, declined. The concept of the “modern state,” which rested on the idea that the population should be mobilized by state leaders in the cause of the nation, emerged from the ashes of the *ancien regime*, according to Whitney. While the old order’s claims to legitimacy rested on real or imagined ties with past leaders and patriarchs, the “modern state” existed to promote the principles of democracy and nationhood. By the late 1930’s, the goals of Cuban nationalism, emphasizing the creation of a sovereign, democratic state accurately representing and striving for the good of the population, began to coalesce with those of the state, and it “became the collective patrimony of society.” These were the sentiments behind the constitutional consensus of 1940, which led to the inclusion of many of the demands of 1933.<sup>25</sup>

A point where this study and that of Whitney converge concerns the treatment of Batista’s methods and motives. One of Whitney’s main guidelines in his study was that he would take Batista at his word. He assumed that Batista indeed felt inclined to lessen the plight of the worker and did not have ulterior motives when instituting his reforms.<sup>26</sup> This being the case, Whitney believed that Batista viewed himself as the guarantor of the revolutionary goals of 1933 and that he truly desired to create a democratic system in Cuba. If these two issues are accepted as fact, Batista’s actions take on new meaning.

During the years between 1934 and 1937 Cuba was in constant turmoil. Strikes, riots, and political violence were the themes of the day. Being the chief of the armed

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<sup>25</sup> Whitney, 7-9.

<sup>26</sup> Whitney, 15

forces and with no civil method to contain the situation, Batista allowed the violent repression of the protestors and activists in an effort to calm the scene. According to Whitney, not until all the organizational autonomy gained by the popular classes was swept away could an “organic” democratic movement take hold.<sup>27</sup> The author then noted Batista’s acceptance of idealism only when it was practical. He quoted Batista stating that “all ideas are useless unless they can be put into practice.”<sup>28</sup> For Whitney, the repression so prevalent from 1934 until 1937 was a product of Batista’s pragmatism. He saw a problem and knew he could not attain his goals until it was solved, so he found a solution. In Batista’s eyes mass repression was necessary for mass reform.

This quality of pragmatism will serve as a central motive leading to the union between Batista and the PCC. When he finally quelled all the unrest on the island, he needed a way to stabilize the situation. Realizing violent means would only quiet the opposition temporarily, leaving deep undercurrents of discontent, Batista turned to the Communist Party. Here, Whitney enunciated an argument Domínguez only implied. Despite still being illegal, the Party had strong connections in organized labor, its members occupying several posts in important and powerful unions. Labor unions were the largest political groups on the island and were responsible for most of the strikes and other disturbances. A relationship that reined in the workers could prove most beneficial to Batista. This paper will argue that Batista’s realization of the PCC’s power and abilities concerning organized labor, combined with an internal shift in the Party’s tactics, led to the cooperation between the two. As Whitney argued, this paper will contend that Batista was not a communist but saw in the PCC a means to an end.

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<sup>27</sup> Whitney, 123.

<sup>28</sup> Whitney, 128.

In his biography, *Fulgencio Batista: From Revolutionary to Strongman*, Frank Argote-Freyre took many of the same conceptions of Batista offered by Whitney and Domínguez and applied them to Batista's entire public career. In his work, the first of a proposed two-volume set, Argote-Freyre traced Batista's life from birth until 1940, the year of his presidential election. In the preface, the author noted the existence of "many Batistas." He stated that the recognition of the multi-dimensionality of Batista would be a main theme in his work, and that he would avoid the cardboard cutout of Batista that our generation inherited from past histories. In dealing with Batista's role in the government, Argote-Freyre avoided the idea that Batista ruled with a supreme mandate. Instead of a military dictator, Argote-Freyre called Batista a "strong man."<sup>29</sup> He claimed that while Batista's word carried great weight in Cuba, there were others who also wielded power on the island. This is evident in his treatment of the overthrow of Grau. The author cited the numerous meetings Batista had with Grau, Mendieta, and U.S. Ambassador Jefferson Caffery, in which Batista was forced to compromise with all sides to attain a viable situation. Where many have claimed that Grau was forced out, Argote-Freyre noted Grau's decision to resign as long as his terms were met.<sup>30</sup> Grau's resignation, the insertion of Carlos Hevia as president for a short time, and the compromise that brought Mendieta to power are consistent with Jorge I. Domínguez's portrayal of Batista as a powerbroker.

Concerning Batista's reforms of the late 1930's, Argote-Freyre saw in them Batista's desire to aid the Cuban poor, from which he claimed descent. He noted the many occasions when Batista made high-minded statements about elevating the Cuban

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<sup>29</sup> Argote-Freyre, preface, xi.

<sup>30</sup> Argote-Freyre, 131.

poor, both materially and ideologically.<sup>31</sup> In many ways he adhered to Whitney's assertion that we must take Batista at his word when he spoke of his social goals. Argote-Freyre credited Batista with a social conscience, but also viewed his actions from a political point of view. In keeping with his assertion of the "many Batistas," Argote-Freyre called the reforms a "power grab" by a leader who wished to occupy the position of Cuba's benefactor. The balance struck between Batista's social and political goals is characteristic of Argote-Freyre's work. A main contribution is the idea that Batista's agenda was far more complex than a desire for political power or the social advancement of the Cuban people. Argote-Freyre's interpretation demonstrates the shifting importance of these goals and how Batista was more or less driven by each depending on the situation.

Overall, this study aims to challenge some of the images of Fulgencio Batista which were constructed in efforts to understand the Revolution of 1959. The focus of the study, his relationship with the Communist party, stands strongly against the image of Batista as a puppet-president. While during this time the U.S. did have relations with the communists due to the exigencies of World War II, State Department records show that Batista was far too close to the communists in the eyes of American policy makers. In examining the relationship it will also become apparent that Batista was not the reactionary he is so often supposed to be. Rather, he was a pragmatic man who mediated Cuban politics and used his power to push Cuba towards a nominally democratic system by the time he stepped down in 1944.

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<sup>31</sup> Argote-Freyre, 202-04.



Chroniclers of Cuban history benefit from the fact that many of the functionaries in politics and society or those close to them later authored books about the events in which they took part. Not excluded from this list is Batista himself. After his overthrow in 1959, he wrote several books, the two most important of which are *Respuesta*, later reprinted in English as *Cuba Betrayed*,<sup>32</sup> and *Piedras Y Leyes*, also reprinted in English as *The Growth and Decline of the Cuban Republic*.<sup>33</sup>

As its original title, *Respuesta* (the Spanish word for “Answer”), suggests, *Cuba Betrayed* is Batista’s answer to how the Cuban Revolution succeeded. In his first book written while in exile, Batista painted himself as a victim of Castro’s propaganda, which tarnished his image among the Cuban population. He cited the damage done to his regime by the protests and demonstrations held at the slightest provocation by supporters of Castro’s movement (M-26-7).<sup>34</sup> He referred to the Herbert Matthews interview of Fidel Castro in the *New York Times* as particularly injurious to his regime, claiming the interview created the legend of Fidel Castro as well as demoralized federal troops.

An interesting aspect of *Cuba Betrayed* is the commonalities it shares with Castro’s *History Will Absolve Me*. Batista attempted to do to Castro what Castro had done to him at the trial for the Moncada attack. Batista’s narrative often revolved around the acts of terrorism and sabotage committed by the M-26-7 before and after January 1959. Just as Castro complained of government persecution of political dissidents, Batista cited violence perpetrated against those who refused to support Castro, such as workers who failed to strike. Further, the author noted other violence perpetuated by

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<sup>32</sup> Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar, *Cuba Betrayed*, 1st ed. (New York: Vantage Press, 1962).

<sup>33</sup> Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar, *The Growth and Decline of the Cuban Republic* (New York;: Devin-Adair, 1964).

<sup>34</sup> Batista y Zaldívar, *Cuba Betrayed* 40.

*fidelistas*, ranging from assassinations to bombings of public buildings and events. As well, he echoed Castro's accusations of political repression by citing the extreme censorship of the press and the curtailment of personal freedoms.<sup>35</sup>

Batista claimed that the final blow to his government was the arms embargo directed against the regime by the United States. "When the causes are completely revealed and the sources and magnitude of the traffic of arms are known with certainty, it will be seen to what degree the entire order of the traditional international system broke down."<sup>36</sup> Batista felt that a main cause of his overthrow was the withdrawal of support by the United States, culminating with the arms embargo enacted in March, 1958. He supported this by quoting a secret U.S. Senate subcommittee meeting at which Earl E.T. Smith, former ambassador to Cuba, testified that it was unwise to have discontinued the arms shipments. According to Smith, Batista had no chance of recovery after the embargo because the armed forces and the population knew the United States would no longer offer its support. He portrayed himself as the one man who saw it all coming but the world ignored his denunciations of Castro's communist intentions. Batista seemed to feel that he was not at fault for the downfall of his government because he had done so much for the advancement of his people. In his mind, he was the victim of a terrible betrayal by the armed forces, the population, and American policy.

Aside from being a telling reference into the mind of the man, Batista contributed much to our understanding of the 1950's, providing extensive information. The book is filled with statistics and testimonies concerning the situation of the population before and after the Revolution, but the mass of facts are somewhat disjointed, leaving any analysis

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<sup>35</sup> Batista y Zaldívar, *Cuba Betrayed* 30, 52-71.

<sup>36</sup> Batista y Zaldívar, *Cuba Betrayed* 142.

to the reader. He pointed out all the advances made during his tenures as head of state, but failed to address the discontent that apparently spread across the island. By dismissing the growing opposition to his government among the non-belligerent sectors, Batista took away agency from the people as actors in the Revolution and gave it all to Castro. He essentially argued that his downfall was a function of Castro's influence and had no connection to the will of the people. This is the final plank in the argument in which Batista suggests the people of Cuba were happy with the *status quo* and it was Castro, and the menace of the Communist International, that forced the Revolution upon them.

The second book Batista published during his exile after the Revolution was *Piedras y Leyes*, soon translated into English as *The Growth and Decline of the Cuban Republic*.<sup>37</sup> He began this book by recognizing, as Louis Pérez did, the process undertaken by Fidel Castro of altering history so as to gain legitimacy. Batista did not make use of the same quote by Karl Marx to explain Castro's efforts, but the wording suggested that Batista saw in the early 1960's the process Pérez later identified in the early 1980's.<sup>38</sup>

Batista's argument in *The Growth and Decline of the Cuban Republic* was a continuation of that in *Cuba Betrayed*. However, where *Cuba Betrayed* was an attack on Castro and his methods, this work praised the "economic and social developments and the... legislative work and constructive accomplishments of [Batista's] various administrations."<sup>39</sup> The author sketched some of the salient events of his first regime and

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<sup>37</sup> Batista y Zaldívar, *The Growth and Decline of the Cuban Republic*.

<sup>38</sup> Batista y Zaldívar, *The Growth and Decline of the Cuban Republic* x-xii.

<sup>39</sup> Batista y Zaldívar, *The Growth and Decline of the Cuban Republic* 1.

the *Auténtico* years that led to his second coup in March of 1952. He again spoke of the accomplishments of his government and pointed out how the *Auténticos*, whom he repeatedly labeled gangsters and accused of corruption, missed the chance that had been given them to be remembered as great statesmen.

In explaining the coup of March 1952, Batista claimed that it was President Carlos Prío Socarras who held ultimate responsibility. Batista cited a meeting with Dr. Juan J. Remos, a spokesperson for Prío, at which Remos told Batista that unless Carlos Hevia, the *Auténtico* candidate, made great gains in support before the upcoming elections they would be won by the *Ortodoxo Party*. This caused Prío great angst as the *Ortodoxos* earlier stated that upon their electoral victory, they would set up a “people’s court” at which he would stand trial for corruption. To prevent the *Ortodoxos*’ electoral victory Prío planned a coup to remain in power. Batista told Remos that this would cause much bloodshed and divide Cuba irreparably as his administration did not hold the support of the Cuban population and only remained in power due to its constitutionality. He told Remos to plead with Prío to change his course. Despite this advice, Remos later returned with word that Prío had not changed his mind. According to Batista, this was the ultimate motivation for his overthrow of the constitutional Prío regime. Batista saw himself as the only one with broad enough support to save the island from an insurrection.<sup>40</sup>

After establishing this point, Batista went on to note the social advances made during his administrations, citing especially statistics concerning education, standard of living, and employment, all of which were among the best in the hemisphere. Again,

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<sup>40</sup> Batista y Zaldívar, *The Growth and Decline of the Cuban Republic* 33-35.

Batista implicitly asked why, if the people of Cuba were happy and enjoyed the fruits of good government, they accepted so willingly the regime of Fidel Castro. To answer this question he, as in *Cuba Betrayed*, cited the insurgency and propaganda espoused by the Castro's group and the Communist International.

An individual who unabashedly opposed the Batista regime was Ricardo Adam y Silva. A member of the officer corps deposed in the Sergeants' Revolt, Adam y Silva was part of the meager force that defended and later surrendered the Hotel Nacional to Batista's army. He gave his account of the events of 1933 in his book, *La Gran Mentira*.<sup>41</sup> As suggested by its title, Adam y Silva sought to unravel the "big lie" perpetrated by Batista and his partisans concerning the Revolution of 1933.

In his thoroughly documented volume, Adam y Silva asserted that Batista, contrary to the standard version of the Revolution of 1933, was not acting on behalf of the enlisted men when he suddenly took control over Camp Columbia, but was carrying out a plot hatched during the final days of the Machado regime. The plan, as stated, was that the sergeants would overthrow the reformist-minded Grau regime and re-install a military dictatorship in the same vein as the one presided over by Machado. Many of the officials of the ousted regime would be allowed to reenter the country and even regain some of their old positions. The author portrayed Batista as the pawn of imperialist forces who still supported Machado's lenient regulation of business.<sup>42</sup> The author however, chose to ignore entirely Batista's reformist tendencies as well as his anti-Machado activities that began as early as 1931 when he became a member of a founding cell of the ABC, which fought the regime desperately. While Adam y Silva's accusations

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<sup>41</sup> Ricardo Adam y Silva, *La Gran Mentira, 4 De Septiembre De 1933* (Habana,: Editorial Lex, 1947).

<sup>42</sup> Adam y Silva, 165-169.

concerning the officials of Machado's government did eventually ring true (many Machado officials returned to their former jobs and even Machado himself was allowed to return to Cuba<sup>43</sup>) it is necessary to discount somewhat the author's vehement indictment of Batista as he is clearly biased.

This paper seeks to stay away from interpretations with such a strong possibility of being skewed in one direction because of the personal and professional affiliations retained by the authors. These works are invaluable for their insight into the minds of the actors involved in government during the era and for what they implicitly say. However, they must be viewed with attention to the predisposition of their authors. Further, the date of publication should be taken into account, especially concerning Batista's works. Both of the books considered here were published in the first half of the 1960's within five years of Batista's ouster. One must question what the author sought to achieve in these two works. Both of these books amount to a refutation of blame for the onslaught of the Castro regime, which had declared itself communist in nature by early 1961. Because of the Cold War mood of the 1960's, many historians, and Batista himself, downplayed the relationship he maintained with the Communist Party, one that was quite cozy by the end of his presidential term in 1944. Frank Argote-Freyre said of the alliance, that it was "a politically inconvenient one, both for the Cuban Revolution and for members of the Cuban exile community who considered themselves *batistianos*. As a result, it has been largely ignored in the historiography."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Machado never returned as by this time he was on his deathbed in Florida.

<sup>44</sup> Argote-Freyre, 354, footnote 11.

### **Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar: His Youth and Career until 1933**

Fulgencio Batista is an enigmatic figure. As large a role as he played in the governing of Cuba during the middle third of the twentieth century, it is surprising that only recently has a scholarly biography of the sergeant-turned-president been completed. He was not a political idealist, like many of those who surrounded him, but a clever tactician and pragmatist who was able to adapt quickly to the capricious nature of Cuban politics. In 1933, when he entered the political scene, his powerbase was primarily composed of the army and police forces. His political skill, however, allowed him to make alliances with other people and groups that did have mass followings, thereby guaranteeing him a stake in politics for the better part of a quarter century.<sup>45</sup>

Ruben Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar was born in 1901 to Belisario Batista and his wife Carmela Zaldívar. Belisario fought in the war for Cuban independence as a sergeant under General Jose Maceo. On the occasion of the birth of their first child, the young couple lived at the town of Veguitas, near the sugar port of Antilla, which served the United Fruit Company. They were employed, like most in the region, in the cutting of sugarcane and were of the lowest social class. Batista's parents seem to have been mulatto but may have had some indigenous blood as well. Batista's youth was somewhat

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<sup>45</sup> Whitney, 122.

disorganized. As a young child he attended a public school at Banes. Later he went to a Quaker school at night and cut cane during the day.<sup>46</sup>

In 1915, when Fulgencio was fourteen, his mother died. This was a terrible blow to the youth who was quite close to her. After her death the desire to quit the cane fields propelled him to leave home. Also at this time he dropped his first name, Rubén. His mother's pet name for him was "Beno," but he decided that to honor her he would never allow anyone to call him by that name again. From then on he was simply *Fulgencio*. His first stop after leaving home was some forty miles away at Holguín on the farm of an uncle. He stayed for several weeks, but was unhappy with the conditions so he moved on to the town of San German where he took a job as a water boy with a work crew. Employed in the preparation of the land for a new cane plantation, Batista quickly learned all he could about the cultivation of the crop. He returned to Banes and had thoughts of becoming a cane farmer himself, but his restlessness pushed him to leave as soon as he had enough money.<sup>47</sup>

While he would return intermittently to work in the cane fields, never again would he live at the family *bohio*. Over the next several years, Batista occupied a number of jobs. His first contact with the army came at Dumois. A contingent of the army was posted there because of a threatened strike. Batista found work with the army doing odd jobs such as washing bridles. At other times he worked as a tailor's and then a carpenter's apprentice, and a hand boy at a barbershop. At Holguín he finally achieved a goal he had set several years before. The railroaders he met while living at Dumois had impressed him with their stories of far away places and their worldliness. After several

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<sup>46</sup> Argote-Freyre, 2.

<sup>47</sup> Edmund A. Chester, *A Sergeant Named Batista*, 1st ed. (New York, : Holt, 1954) 10-12.



months hanging around Holguín, he found a job with Consolidated Railways as a brakeman. Those were happy times when he was traveling up and down the Consolidated Railways system, and he continued working there until he was twenty.<sup>48</sup>

Throughout his youth, Batista endeavored to educate himself. He was known on the railway for his propensity to pass his days in his room reading rather than partying and drinking as did many of those with whom he worked. In April of 1921, Batista decided his education could progress no farther atop a boxcar so he joined the army and was assigned to the First Battalion of the Forth Company of Infantry at Camp Columbia, near Havana. Batista liked army life. His room, board, and clothing were taken care of for him, and he had access to the camp library, giving him opportunities to study a myriad of subjects. He focused mainly on law studies. As he did not have the high school credits necessary to enter law school, he simply read all the law books he could get his hands on. To improve his vocational opportunities, Batista took up shorthand and stenography. He enrolled in the San Mario College in Havana to take night classes. There, the director of the college recognized Batista's seriousness about his studies. When Batista finished his first term in the army, he was offered and took a job as an assistant professor. He was later promoted to the position of full professor and taught commercial grammar. Batista remained at the college for several months but soon re-enlisted in the army, joining the rural guard. He realized his ambition might be better served in the army rather than as a professor.<sup>49</sup>

In the rural guard Batista was assigned to *Finca Maria*, the farm of President Zayas, near the town of Wajay. It was a good assignment; the duties were light and he

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<sup>48</sup> Chester, 16.

<sup>49</sup> Chester, 18-21.

had access to a large library. As well, Batista met many important politicians and statesmen and had the opportunity to talk with the president himself at times. He stayed at the *finca* until the end of Zayas's term when he transferred to the regular army. During this time he was stationed at the *Atarés* fortress near Havana and later at *Castillo de la Fuerza* in the city center. These years were invaluable for Batista as he gained experience in the operation and politics of the army, while being assigned to serve as the secretary for the Inspector General, Colonel Federico Rasco y Ruiz. Also during this time he was promoted to corporal.<sup>50</sup>

In the last year of the presidency of Gerardo Machado (1924-1933), Batista was promoted to sergeant stenographer of the seventh district at La Cabana. It was at this point that his career really took off. From his position, he worked for the councils of war and was privy to information others were not. He began to see that the regime, known as the *Machadato*, was collapsing, and he joined a cell of the ABC revolutionary organization, (ABC). The cell he joined was primarily dedicated to acquiring information and passing it on to others. His work provided the basis for articles, pamphlets, and political tracts for dissemination throughout the organization. As a stenographer in a military court, which had begun to try civilians accused of political crimes as well, he was a valued informant. Batista may have been part of multiple cells of the ABC or connected with another revolutionary group. Suffice it to say that while not a leader, he was indeed a member of the opposition against Machado. His participation in the ABC raises questions concerning Batista's ideology at the time as the ABC attacked the regime from the right, using terrorist tactics. Batista would later find

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<sup>50</sup> Chester, 18.

his own government the victim of such rightist venom and himself on the left. Reasons for Batista's association with the ABC are varied. At the time the ABC was the most powerful and most effective group acting against Machado. Frank Argote-Freyre, the author of the recently released biography of Batista, claimed that as a youth, his ideology was only partly formed. Batista may have joined the ABC less for its ideology and more because he saw it as the best avenue of opposition to Machado. Also, Batista's political foresight made him realize that as the *Machadato* fell, it would be beneficial to have connections among the opposition.<sup>51</sup>

The debate about when Batista began conspiring against the Machado regime is considerable. The Sergeants' Revolt of 4 September 1933 should be seen as the continuation of conspiracies in which Batista had been involved since 1931. With his privileged position in the army, Batista gained firsthand experience in the art of conspiracy. Cuban politics was such that "the formation of a new government was merely a prelude to new conspiracies by those left outside the ruling coalition." By the end of the *Machadato*, the majority of the armed forces conspired with one group or another.<sup>52</sup>

On the night of 3 September, Batista and a group of soldiers ranked sergeants and below, met to discuss grievances they had with the army, namely poor pay and housing conditions and a rumored cut in the numbers of enlisted men. Their conspiracy began as one with defensive aims. In the aftermath of the installation of the provisional government, maintenance of position and power was the goal. Originally, the conspiracy was in response to rumors of decreases in pay and numbers of enlisted men. In the early

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<sup>51</sup> Argote-Freyre, 40-41.

<sup>52</sup> Argote-Freyre, 51.

stages of the movement another sergeant, Pablo Rodríguez, shared power with Batista. The president of the Enlisted Men's Club, he was especially popular and proved to be a powerful ally. Supporters of both Batista and Rodríguez argue about the actual division of power between the two men. Each side claims to be the mastermind of the operation. According to one of the original conspirators, Ramón Cruz Vidal, Batista's leadership was never in question. "He was the one who knew the most."<sup>53</sup>

Batista's first public speech was memorable. Upon the fall of Machado, in the *Atarés* fortress, the tortured bodies of Sergeant Miguel Ángel Hernández, Félix Alpízar, a student, and Margarito Iglesias, a labor leader were discovered. The three men became martyrs to the anti-Machado cause, and their funerals drew the attention of everyone on the island, except the military brass. The military high-ups did not comprehend the significance of the funerals and sent only a small, low-ranking delegation to Sergeant Hernández's funeral. This poor showing of support was considered disgraceful by the enlisted men and others in attendance. Due to the lack of a high ranking officer to eulogize Sergeant Hernández, those gathered asked Batista to speak. Batista harshly condemned the military leadership for the lack of compassion they showed towards the funerals, even boldly proclaiming that the non-commissioned officers (NCOs) would one day lead a democratic revolution. The threatening nature of the speech was noticed by his superiors, placing Batista in greater danger, but it also increased his visibility and popularity among the enlisted men. Batista would later comment that the speech was a "tactical error," but it consolidated his leadership of the movement. Given the political

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<sup>53</sup> Argote-Freyre, 58.

cunning Batista showed throughout his life, one must consider the possibility that the impassioned speech was a calculated risk rather than an emotional outburst.<sup>54</sup>

Equally important at the Sergeant Hernández's funeral, Batista was introduced to important civilian leaders. Sergio Carbó, the influential journalist, was one such leader. Carbó was a top intellectual among the students and workers. He stood for democratic principles and the alleviation of the plight of the Cuban poor. His relationship with Batista would be critical in the coming weeks. It also provided some information about Batista's personal ideology at this time. Sergio Carbó was a reformer, and his newspaper *La Semana* was dedicated to social issues. For Batista to choose as one of his closest advisors a man of such leanings, they must have had much in common. Batista further suggested his social conscience when he signed the *Proclamation of the Revolutionaries* along side seventeen civilians. The document was moderate in tone but reformist in intent.<sup>55</sup>

As the chosen day for the revolt approached, the ranks of the conspirators swelled until they were forced to meet in large venues such as theaters. On 3 September loose lips allowed Captain Mario Torres Menier to find out about the meeting scheduled for the next day. When Batista arrived at Camp Columbia the morning of 4 September he was met by the Torres Menier. The situation had taken a new, more dangerous direction, but Batista, as he would do several more times before the coup was complete, used his political cunning keep the movement from collapsing. He invited Torres Menier to attend the meeting and hear the enlisted men's complaints, but at the same time he asked fellow conspirators to contact allies at military installations around Havana and request

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<sup>54</sup> Argote-Freyre, 59.

<sup>55</sup> Argote-Freyre, 72.

they come to Camp Columbia armed and ready for battle. Batista's invitation to Torres Menier was crucial as it suggested that the enlisted men were not secretly conspiring, but openly letting their complaints be heard. The army chief, General Sanguily, upon hearing of the events from Torres Menier only told him to attend the meeting and obtain a list of complaints. The officialdom failed to understand the gravity of the situation.

If there was any questions as to the leadership of the movement, the meeting of enlisted men attended by Torres Menier put an end to them. Batista stalled for time until the meeting room was entirely full of sergeants and enlisted men. He complained of the poor treatment enlisted men received and the lack of credit they got concerning the overthrow of Machado. He said that the sergeants' motivation extended beyond material issues, claiming that the soldiers' dignity was at stake. The meeting escalated into a raucous affair complete with chants of "*Viva Batista.*" However, to buy more time, Batista gave assurances to Captain Torres Menier that the men would still follow the officers' orders. Torres Menier left the meeting after calling for a list of grievances for the military higher-ups to contemplate.<sup>56</sup>

When Torres Menier called again to request the complaint list he was told that another meeting was scheduled for later that night at which no officers would be allowed; there the list would supposedly be drafted. While the officers waited for the list that would never come, Batista called allies around Havana and invited them to the meeting. His list of calls included his friend Carbó and the leaders of the *Directorio Estudiantil Universitario* (DEU). This was important because it gives way to Batista's ideological leanings again. It is significant that his closest advisors were the student and labor

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<sup>56</sup> Argote-Freyre, 68.

leaders and not members of the ABC. In fact, by this point Batista had broken most of his ties with the conservative group even though they would support him intermittently in the future.

The night of 4 September 1933 saw a meeting of hundreds of enlisted men at which Batista openly declared the revolt. The movement was at a crossroads. Over the next several hours they would take control of most of the armed forces, but it would become clear that he could not oust the officer corps without toppling the Céspedes government. Possibly feeling a little in over their heads, the soldiers were unsure how to proceed. If the coup failed, there would certainly be retribution by the officer corps against the mutineers that could lead to court martial, and possibly execution. At this point the student groups provided the means for the legitimization of the overthrow. The coalition that emerged between the students and the sergeants was an example of Batista's ability and willingness to make pragmatic political alliances to further his ambitions. This relationship served both sides. It offered the soldiers pardon, and, in the absence of the officer corps, it allowed them a chance to advance in rank. As well, the anti-government forces gained access to power.

From this civil-military agreement came a revolutionary junta composed of five men, Ramón Grau San Martín, a well known anti-Machado physician and university professor, Porfirio Franca, a banker, the lawyer José Miguel Irisarri, a criminal law professor, Guillermo Portéla, and the journalist and author, Sergio Carbó. This junta, known as the Pentarchy, announced a plan for a new Cuba including calls for national sovereignty and abolition of the Platt Amendment and the establishment of a modern democracy. The group promoted Batista to the position of *Jefe del Ejército*, or chief of

the Army. Within a week, the Pentarchy collapsed under student pressure, and Grau became president.<sup>57</sup>

So began the Batista era of Cuban history. The Sergeants' Revolt of 1933 introduced Fulgencio Batista to Cuban politics. It also allowed Batista to exhibit some of the political skill he would show throughout his career. In the planning stages of the revolt, Batista used his education in conspiracy that he gained during his time with the ABC and in the military courts. He put his sense of timing to use at the funeral of Sergeant Miguel Ángel Hernández, where he gave enough information about his plans to push on the movement and gather adherents but not enough to arouse serious suspicion among the officers. His ability to immediately understand cause and effect of any event helped him deal with Captain Torres Menier in a way that consolidated his leadership and bought more time. Finally, Batista showed his propensity for making alliances. Throughout his career, Batista needed to join with civilian groups to gain influence outside the military. His alliance with the DEU, though short-lived, suggested his willingness to compromise so as to further his goals and gave insight into the moderate reformist platform he would follow during his time in power.

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<sup>57</sup> Argote-Freyre, 63-75.



## **The Communist Party of Cuba: From its Origins until 1933**

In 1925, only a year before Batista joined the regular army, the *Partido Comunista de Cuba* (PCC) was founded. In the early 1920's, the first groups sprang up who called themselves communists. In August of 1925 these scattered pockets became unified under one leadership. The first secretary general of the party was Julio Antonio Mella. His tenure was rather short time as he was soon arrested and deported to Mexico by the Machado government, the party's main antagonist in those years. The PCC was formed during the years in which Machado consolidated his grip on the country and became a dictator. As political freedoms were tightly restricted, the PCC was forced to go underground.

During the 1920's, the communists used the familiar tactic of the front organization. The most important such organization was the *Liga Anti-Imperialista* (Anti-Imperialist League) through which they protested the government's connection with the United States as well as other issues they found to be contrary to their goals. The party focused the majority of its efforts on the trade union movement. The railroad workers, weavers, and tobacco worker's unions all contained notable "revolutionary fractions" organized and led by PCC members. By the late 1920's the party virtually took over the Cuban labor federation, the *Confederación Nacional Obrera Cubana* (CNOOC) placing one of its own, Cesar Vilár, in the secretary general's position.

As resistance to the Machado regime grew, the PCC became more active in the campaign to oust the president-turned-dictator. Although the CNOC was outlawed, it held itself together and continued to engage in strikes. In 1930 it called for a one-day general strike to exhibit labor's discontent with the regime. Later that year it organized an important May Day protest. By late 1932, the party had organized and led important work stoppages in the textile, shoe making, and cigar industries. These efforts culminated in a strike in the sugar industry in early 1933. Communists claimed that 20,000 workers participated in the action. The tangible result of the strike was the creation of the *Sindicato Nacional Obrero de la Industria Azucarera* (SNOIA), the first national sugar worker's union on the island.

Later that year the communists played a significant role in the general strike that dealt the final blow to the Machado government. They originally strongly supported the strike but quizzically, just before the ouster of Machado, they futilely urged its end. Some have claimed that the party realized if the strike gained much more momentum it would lead to armed insurrection which in turn would lead to U.S. intervention. To avoid the landing of American troops, they struck a deal with Machado. Others claim that the party leaders agreed to call off the strike if Machado granted the party and the CNOC legal status and gave the PCC government money to carry out its plans.<sup>58</sup> Their call to end the strike went unheard, and Machado was forced out of office by August. Whatever the motives, the arrangement between the two factions points to the political flexibility of the party, a characteristic that would become evident again in the mid to late 1930's.

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<sup>58</sup> Robert Jackson Alexander, *Communism in Latin America* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1957) 270-72.

Significant to this study, the PCC's role in the coup of 4 September was minor. The communists offered their support, but they were not warmly accepted and possibly even rejected outright.<sup>59</sup> It is likely that their shady dealings with Machado on the eve of his downfall were remembered. This same factor, combined with the Communist International's (Comintern) shift towards popular front politics, would allow the PCC to make a pact with Batista five years later.

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<sup>59</sup> Argote-Freyre, 71.

## **Era of Conflict: 1933 – 1937**

### **Grau's Provisional Government and the Strike of 1935**

In the unstable situation that followed the fall of Machado, the various parties and factions scrambled for support and to find their place in the new Cuban government. Batista and the army formed a coalition with the students that was a cornerstone of support for the Grau administration. Sumner Welles's charge that the new government was "frankly communistic" could not have been further from the truth.<sup>60</sup> In fact, the PCC bitterly opposed Grau. The bourgeois, intellectual physician still represented the "last hope of the ruling class" to the party. It chided Grau's revolutionary credentials, noting that his government still stood "in the shadow of the American dreadnaught, the U.S.S. Mississippi and thirty-seven other fighting vessels."<sup>61</sup> At this point, a major plank in the PCC's platform was anti-imperialism. They considered Grau too close to the pro-American elite.

Though unrest continued throughout the three and one half months of the Grau regime, the largest uprising came upon the return of the ashes of Julio Antonio Mella from Mexico. Mella, a founder of the PCC, was assassinated in 1929 in Mexico City. Most blame Machado's thugs for the murder. His ashes returned to Havana on 29 September 1933. Initially, the PCC was given permission to organize a march in honor of the event, but shortly before, Interior Minister Antonio Guiteras rescinded the

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<sup>60</sup> Government Printing Office, "United States Foreign Relations," (1933), vol. 2, 379.

<sup>61</sup> Alexander, 273.

permission and dispatched soldiers to the area. They were met by a large crowd of communist supporters waving red flags in spite of the government's decree that no such demonstration should take place. The responsibility for the first shot fired remains unclaimed, but by the end of the day the ashes had been lost, the monument destroyed, and the red flags captured. Six people were killed and twenty-seven were wounded.<sup>62</sup>

Leading up to and after the overthrow of Grau, the PCC was quite involved in the labor unrest that kept the nation in a constant state of turbulence. Some even gave the communists a large part of the responsibility for the fall of Grau, saying that their continuous activities in the countryside persuaded the U.S. to withhold recognition, and lack thereof pushed Grau out of office.<sup>63</sup> Whatever the case, the party was active in strikes in the medical profession, among teachers and employees of the Department of Public Instruction, and in walk-outs among rail and textile workers in Havana, all calling for better conditions and the formation of a workers' and peasants' government.<sup>64</sup>

During the Grau administration Batista remained relatively quiet concerning civilian affairs. However, in two different incidents, he consolidated his position in the army. The first incident was the Battle of the *Hotel Nacional*. Since 4 September, the deposed officer corps gathered at the hotel. From there, they openly plotted to overthrow Grau and courted U.S. support by attempting to reconstitute the Céspedes government, but the ousted president would have none of it. The hotel represented a bed of opposition in the middle of Havana, and therefore, had to be dealt with. At the suggestion of Interior

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<sup>62</sup> Argote-Freyre, 94.

<sup>63</sup> Alexander, 275.

<sup>64</sup> Jefferson Caffery, "To Cordell Hull," 11 January 1934, ed. Robert Lester and Paul Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945* (Frederick, MD.: University Publications of America, 1985).

Minister Guiteras, Batista made ready for an attack on the hotel. On the morning of 2 October, the firing began. With Guiteras by his side, Batista directed a campaign that lasted until four in the afternoon. As a military operation, the attack was a failure for the enlisted men, who lost as much as one hundred men compared to only two deaths among the officers. As a political issue, however, it was a success. With the old officer corps dispersed, Batista greatly strengthened his control over the military. By this point, the colonel from such modest beginnings was the most powerful man on the island.<sup>65</sup>

A second attempt to oust Batista from the head of the military and get rid of Grau began in late October. Some felt that Batista was wrong to have done away with the old officer corps and that the Grau government was destabilizing the military. The ABC was also eager to strike against Batista as he had abandoned them after the fall of Machado. The conspirators had supporters in many of the military installations around Havana, even Camp Columbia. The leadership of the operation was divided among four men, Lieutenant José Barrientos of the Aviation Corps, Major Ciro Leonard, formerly in charge of the San Ambrosia Barracks, Second Lieutenant Pedro Gener Núñez of the Presidential Guard, and Colonel Juan Blas Hernández, former guerilla fighter against Machado.

The target date was 8 November, a time when Batista was supposed to be traveling outside Havana. Unfortunately for the conspirators, Batista gained knowledge of the plot and remained at Camp Columbia to ready for the upcoming fight. Knowing that Batista was aware of the planned revolt, the attackers began their assault early. Just after midnight, Camp Columbia was attacked from the air, causing chaos and confusion

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<sup>65</sup> Argote-Freyre, 96-102.

throughout Havana. In reality, but three planes participated in the attack, only one of which released its payload of ten bombs. At the same time, rebels on the ground, largely made up of ABC members, marched through Havana capturing government buildings and police stations. By the morning the rebels controlled much of the city.

The battle began to swing to the government side when Batista regained total control over Camp Columbia. After this, soldiers began pouring into Havana, and things began to look grim for the rebels. By late afternoon, they were concentrated in two positions, the San Ambrosia Barracks and the *Atarés* fortress. By the evening they were forced to abandon San Ambrosia as it was being shelled from the Havana Bay by the cruiser *Cuba*. Colonel Blas Hernández was against concentrating at *Atarés*, fearing another *Hotel Nacional*. However, the rebels would make their final stand there.

The fighting at *Atarés* continued until 4 p.m. the next day, when the rebels surrendered. The killing, however, did not stop with the flying of the white flag. According to eyewitness accounts, several groups of prisoners were executed outside the fortress, including Blas Hernández. Sporadic fighting continued around Havana for a few days, but the rebellion was basically over with the fall of *Atarés*. The suppression of the insurrection further strengthened Batista's position and unified parts of the Grau government that had, until then, been divided by infighting.<sup>66</sup>

With his position as chief of military now confirmed, Batista watched the administration waver from holding general support to being the object of outright opposition, and he was in contact with Sumner Welles. They met often, and each had the other's ear. As the end of 1933 drew near, Colonel Batista doubtlessly realized that the

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<sup>66</sup> Argote-Freyre, 110-26.

U.S. government was not entirely pleased with the provisional government in Havana and it would not be at all opposed to a new government under his control. As well, domestic support for Grau melted away quickly. Most of the public refused to support Grau's administration or his calls for the election of a constitutional assembly because of his minority government. Even the student groups, once a main source of Grau's support, disassociated themselves with him as early as 6 January 1934.<sup>67</sup> These political desertions, combined with the lack of U.S. recognition, resulted in the coup staged by Batista on 15 January 1934. By that date it became clear to Grau he could no longer maintain power. He agreed to resign, but only to the junta that put him in office back in September. Batista put together a group of men which resembled the original junta, but included more military men and excluded several original members who were currently his enemies. The junta was supposed to choose a new president. Several plans were discussed, one even proposed to make Grau the new army chief. Eventually, the group chose the engineer, Carlos Hevia.

Hevia remained in power for less than forty-eight hours as he did not have the full support of any faction involved. Batista, once again, read the political situation correctly. Before Hevia took power Batista realized that he only had enough support to act as a transitory president until another came along. By 16 January, group after group rejected Hevia's pleas to join his coalition. Batista was proven right. On 17 January he called for Hevia to resign. On 18 January, Hevia did so, and Cuba was without a president until Secretary of State Manuel Márquez Sterling agreed to take the position on a temporary basis some four hours later. Márquez Sterling's charge during his brief time in office was

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<sup>67</sup> Jefferson Caffery, to "Cordell Hull," 11 January 1934, ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.



to head a cross-party meeting of political leaders to find a new president. Batista suggested Mendieta as he was the last man standing of those originally discussed by the junta that accepted Grau's resignation. Mendieta, however, not wanting to look as though he were installed by the army, refused this logic. With this in mind, Márquez Sterling convened a meeting of Mendieta supporters and allies to make official his selection as provisional president. This cleared the way for Mendieta to take the position.<sup>68</sup>

For the communists, the change in government meant little. They continued to cause disruption throughout the countryside and in urban centers. Almost daily the press reported the arrest of "alleged communists" and the discovery of communist propaganda in the offices of labor groups and opposition parties.<sup>69</sup> The party's influence expanded rapidly during this period. The communist-led CNOC brought most of the labor unions into its fold by early 1934 and began to wield real power, often calling for strikes and protests. Further, the party utilized its characteristically strong organizational skills to place representatives in every mill as well as in key positions in most industries. It might have been at this point that Batista first noticed the potential power of the PCC. By late January 1934 the party had already demonstrated its influence by instigating numerous strikes through its control over the CNOC. Batista told U.S. Ambassador Jefferson Caffery that he would like to close the offices of the CNOC in all mill towns as it was the primary catalyst in bringing about unrest and harassment of non-striking workers.

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<sup>68</sup> Argote-Freyre, 126-35.

<sup>69</sup> Jefferson Caffery, "To Cordell Hull," 3 April 1934, 10 April 1934, 28 April 1934, 6 June 1934, 7 July 1934 ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

Caffery agreed, noting the emergence of a very efficient organization during the previous months.<sup>70</sup>

The year 1934 was, like 1933, dominated by strikes and demonstrations. Political violence was the theme of the day with all sides being equally guilty of atrocities such as kidnappings, bombings, and murders. The communists followed classical patterns of cellular organization and advocated a new world after the collapse of capitalism, but they do not seem to have been as active as other groups in terms of violence.<sup>71</sup> The party hoarded large quantities of arms and ammunition, but only fringe groups such as one calling itself T.N.T. actually participated in armed insurrection. In all of 1934 the State Department did not once cite the Communist Party as responsible for bombings in Havana, whereas the ABC and student groups were blamed numerous times.<sup>72</sup> The party instead focused its energy towards instigating strikes and demonstrations.

While some opposition groups were more violent, virtually all of them participated in strike activity during 1934. This led up to the general strike of March 1935. The culmination of more than a year of labor unrest, large scale walk-outs first began in the last weeks of February, when several hundred thousand teachers and students walked out demanding school breakfasts, an increase in teacher's salaries, and better equipment. The unions connected with Grau and former Minister of the Interior Antonio Guiteras's, group *Joven Cuba* (Young Cuba), were the first to join in with a sympathy strike. On 6 March radical students bombed a custom house and the Treasury

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<sup>70</sup> Jefferson Caffery, "To Cordell Hull," 29 January 1934, ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

<sup>71</sup> Jefferson Caffery, "To Cordell Hull," 26 February 1934, ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

<sup>72</sup> "Havana Bombings, 1934" ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

Department building in attempts to promote a general revolutionary strike against the government officially headed by Mendieta but propped up by the army chief, Batista. Batista called the move “disgraceful,” arguing that a civilized nation like Cuba should not be subject to such acts. He also warned that the government would take a strong position against any more such violence.<sup>73</sup> The mayor of Havana, Guillermo Belt, found a particularly curious way of downplaying the work stoppages, commenting that the government would end the conflict “using only rifles, machine guns and cannons would not be necessary,” meaning a full-scale military action was beyond the scope of the uprising.<sup>74</sup> Two days later he would be proven wrong.

After the bombings of the customs house and Treasury Department building, employees of the Treasury and Labor Departments walked out, joining the students and teachers in opposition to the government. By 8 March, employees of five more governmental departments, including those of education, justice, communication, agriculture, and commerce joined the Treasury and Labor Department employees in abandoning their jobs. Employees of seven of twelve governmental departments were then antagonistic to the government. Havana was soon paralyzed as most public sector employees and many of those in private businesses failed to work.<sup>75</sup>

The government response was not long in coming. By 9 March, Mendieta suspended all constitutional guarantees and declared a state of martial law in Havana. Batista named Colonel José Eleutario Pedraza as the military governor of the province. The army, already on notice, received the call to arms at 10 p.m. on the night of 10 March

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<sup>73</sup> J.D. Phillips, "Treasury Bombed in Havana Strike," *New York Times* 7 March 1935: 3.

<sup>74</sup> Associated Press, "Martial Law Said near in Cuba," *Miami Herald* 9 March 1935.: 1A.

<sup>75</sup> J.D. Phillips, "Cuban Strike Gains Despite Firm Hand," *New York Times* 8 March 1935: 12.

and a state of siege was declared by 11 p.m. that same night. There was firing all over the city including the famous Prado and Malecon Drive.<sup>76</sup> In a state of excitement and caution, the government troops enacted harsh tactics to quell the disturbances. Already, the government replaced the Constitution by a "Plan of Eight Points," which among other repressive acts, gave the army and police almost unlimited authority.<sup>77</sup> Strike breakers were given immunity in the case that they killed strikers in the line of duty. Conversely, the death penalty was enacted for crimes such as sabotage of the water and power utilities as well as firing on government employees and functionaries. Even possessing explosives or inflammables could get one executed.<sup>78</sup> The dreaded *ley de fuga* or law of flight was also instituted with at least two falling under its authority.<sup>79</sup> The army restricted public assembly to no more than two people. This was aimed to end the Cuban habit of meeting on street corners and in cafes to discuss politics. The institution of the law in 1935 was stricter than the Law of Public Assembly put in place during the summer of 1933 by the flailing Machado regime which limited meetings to three.<sup>80</sup>

By 10 March, the employees of all but two governmental departments had abandoned their work including all those involved in public transportation. To limit the effects, members of the army and police began to fill the jobs left vacant by the demonstrators. A small number of trains and trolley cars were operated by soldiers. The army also took control of the telegraph and telephone services on the island.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Associated Press, "Machine Guns Fire in Mid-Town Havana," *Miami Herald* 10 March 1935: 3A.

<sup>77</sup> "Pedraza Nombrado Gobernador Militar De La Havana," *La Gaceta* 9 March 1935: 1.

<sup>78</sup> J.D. Phillips, "Cuba Paralyzed by General Strike," *New York Times* 12 March 1935: 1.

<sup>79</sup> J.D. Phillips, "Army Rule Set up Throughout Cuba," *New York Times* 11 March 1935: 1.

<sup>80</sup> Associated Press, "Machine Guns Fire in Mid-Town Havana."

<sup>81</sup> Phillips, "Army Rule Set up Throughout Cuba."

The PCC did not take the leading role one might have expected it to. As noted in the June 1935 issue of *Communist International* the CNOC, entirely under communist control, did not call the workers out until 10 March, several weeks after the movement began. Supporters of Grau and Guiteras primarily directed the action, and the communists remained on the outside of the leadership circle.<sup>82</sup> Even though, on 12 March, by presidential decree, the government dissolved all unions and organizations that had participated in the strike, it took particular notice of the CNOC. It singled out the organization and made it a crime “against the peace and tranquility of the state” to be in any way connected with the as yet, illegal confederation.<sup>83</sup>

By the end of the week, 15 March, the strike was over. Military rule headed by Batista continued. Pedraza, the military governor of Havana Province, used soldiers to push the strikers back to their old positions. Slowly, the situation in Havana calmed. The death toll over the weekend counted thirteen with scores injured and thousands arrested.<sup>84</sup> The suppression of the strike of March 1935 set the tone for the next year and a half. With the presidential decree disbanding all organizations which participated in the strike, the government effectively cleared the political playing field. The reformist groups such as Grau’s new party organized during his exile in Mexico, the *Partido Revolucionario Cubano Auténtico* (*Auténticos*), and the remnants of *Joven Cuba*, suffered from a lack of direction and constant infighting. This, in combination with the repression by the army and police, which still strictly limited the right of assembly, allowed Batista to keep the opposition off balance.

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<sup>82</sup> Alexander, 277.

<sup>83</sup> Associated Press, "State of War Declared by Cuban Leader," *Miami Herald* 12 March 1935: 1A.

<sup>84</sup> Associated Press, "Bomb Explosions Hurt 22 Persons," *Miami Herald* 13 March 1935: 1A.

By late 1936, the radical opposition was largely held in check. The years of repression drastically weakened most of the organizations that stood against the government. Throughout this period, Batista directed the government from a safe position behind the provisional presidents. It was good situation for Batista. He was openly acknowledged as the most powerful man in Cuba. Two American journalists made note of his importance in, and control over, seemingly all situations.<sup>85</sup> He continued to use the civilian leadership as a shield. The existence of a president allowed Batista to act as if the army were under civilian control when he was faced with criticism. In doing so, he deflected the political opposition's attacks at the president and away from the real source of power, the army. He used the civilian government to keep busy the opposition while he and the army ran the country.

When relative calm finally fell over the island in late 1936, the political and economic situation was right for Batista to enter the world of civilian politics with reasonable prospects for success. However, the prospect of Batista as a true civilian leader required something that he did not have, a powerbase outside the armed forces. During the ensuing three years, Batista would set the stage for a run at the presidency by returning to the goals of 1933. He would take the ideals of his friend, Sergio Carbó, and of the reformist Grau government and turn them into vast social programs dramatically increasing the Cuban standard of living. Many of his programs benefited the working class and through them he would open the door to a coalition with organized labor and, at its head, the PCC.

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<sup>85</sup> Argote-Freyre, 140.

## **The Courtship between Batista and the Communists: 1936-1938**

### **The Change in the Communist International Party Line**

Adaptation was nothing new to the Communist Party. In the late 1920's, the party experienced a shift in tactics when Joseph Stalin forced Leon Trotsky and his followers out of the party. The basic ideology of the party went unchanged; it remained strongly pro-worker and anti-imperialist. However, Trotsky's calls for a world wide revolution fell by the wayside in favor of Stalin's calls for revolution in only one country at a time. The change was reflected in the PCC by the expulsion of Sandalio Junco and several others who had been longtime party members but were labeled *Trotskistas*. As well, the Cuban party and national parties around the world experienced greater freedom of policy. They were no longer part of an immediate world-wide revolution, but were able to adjust their methods and goals to their respective national situations.<sup>86</sup> The French Communist Party, the *Parti Communist Français* (PCF), made use of this new found freedom in resolving a conflict over incongruent policies in 1933. The French party's actions brought about another sweeping reform in party policies by 1935 that further increased the autonomy of the national parties across the globe.

For most of the twentieth century, the standard Communist Party line was staunchly against cooperation with other groups. The Socialists were a particular target of communist ire. In Cuba, this is shown in the PCC's attacks on Grau and his followers.

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<sup>86</sup> Antonio Alonso Avila and Jorge Garcia Montes, *Historia del Partido Comunista de Cuba* (Miami, Ediciones Universal: 1970) 80-83.

In 1933, however, the PCF made the first gesture of openness that led to the adoption of the “Popular Front.”

The open assumption of dictatorial powers by Adolph Hitler in early March of 1933 shocked France greatly due to the devastation incurred by that country during World War I. Hitler’s persecution of the German Communist Party was particularly alarming to its French counterpart. On 6 March, only days after Hitler’s seizure of power, the central committee of the PCF issued an open letter to workers including the “administrative commission” of the *Section Francaise Internationale Ouvriere* (SFIO), the French Socialist Party. The letter called for a national day of demonstrations for workers of all political leanings to protest Hitler’s repression of German workers. Maurice Thorez, a leader of the PCF, rebuffed the offer and stated that a united front of workers was necessary, but the fight against socialism remained a top priority of the PCF and the Comintern. Nevertheless, the gesture acted as the first olive branch extended by the Communist Party to its traditional enemies, the socialists.

Another characteristic of the Comintern line in those years was the opposition to all standing capitalist governments. As with the socialists, cooperation with the government in most countries, including France, was strictly forbidden. Because of apprehension caused by growing militarism in Germany, relations between the French and Soviet governments began to improve in the summer of 1933. This caused the PCF some consternation as the Soviet diplomacy was not accompanied by new directives from the Comintern. It also put the French communists in an embarrassing position concerning their opposition to the Treaty of Versailles. Previously, the French and German parties jointly denounced the treaty for allowing “imperialist rearmament,” and it



became a lightning rod for criticism by French party members. However, the growing cordiality between the French and Soviet governments left the PCF on the outside. The denunciation of the Versailles treaty also made the party look pro-German. Rank and file members called for a change.

The PCF was puzzled by the new friendliness with the national government. The response of the regional and local party committees exhibited the confusion. Some continued to call for the downfall of “imperialist France” while others made resolutions of loyalty to the “bourgeois-democratic regime.” The initial confusion was put to rest by the fear of fascism as cooperation became the new theme in the PCF and, indeed, in the party as a whole. The new policy, known as the “Popular Front,” was officially enunciated at the Seventh Communist Congress in Moscow in August of 1935.<sup>87</sup>

Georgi Dimitrov, a high ranking member of the Soviet central committee, elucidated the new policy in a speech on the third day of the congress. He began his oration by lambasting fascism. He defined it as an especially abnormal state and method of government, calling it a “terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital.”<sup>88</sup> According to historians Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, Dimitrov chose his words carefully. By analyzing the narrow class base of the fascist party, the search for broad anti-fascist unity could be facilitated.<sup>89</sup> The speech continued along a similar line. Dimitrov called for a unification of all workers and put no conditions upon such a union except that it must fight nazi-fascism, “the enemy of the class.” Likely realizing that the effectiveness of the shift

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<sup>87</sup> E.H. Carr, *Twilight of the Comintern, 1930-1935* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982) 182-202.

<sup>88</sup> Georgi Dimitrov, *The Working Class against Fascism* (London: 1935) 10.

<sup>89</sup> Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern : A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997) 131.

would be questioned by many communists, Dimitrov was sure to allow for some leeway in the interpretation of the new tactics. He noted that in accordance with the conditions in the state and the character and political involvement of the labor organizations within, the method by which the Popular Front would be implemented could vary. In some countries, collaboration between workers might be able to begin immediately, and might have some influence from the start if they were already tightly organized. On the other hand, countries with less powerful labor groups might need to begin with local or regional cooperation before significant results could be seen.

Dimitrov addressed an issue of critical importance to the Cubans, the idea of cooperation with a non-communist government in his speech, as well. He claimed that in order for the revolutionary parties to work with a standing government, certain conditions must prevail. First, the government must be completely anti-fascist. Second, the government must be progressive enough so that the government and the collaborative parties seeking cooperation would not be too far apart ideologically.<sup>90</sup> The address given by Dimitrov at the Seventh Congress held extreme significance for the platform of communist parties all over the world. Basically, it suspended the class struggle by the proletariat against the dictatorship of capitalism and renounced the idea of armed insurrection in respect to one common goal: the defeat of nazi-fascism.

Francisco Caldiero, who chose Blas Roca as his *nom de guerre*, attended the Congress. Roca served as the secretary general of the party in Cuba both before and after its legalization. Upon his return to the island in late December of 1935, he reunited the members of the general committee not exiled, in prison, or dead after the repression of

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<sup>90</sup> Dimitrov, 12-18.

the March strike. Roca convoked a “plenum” which took place in February of 1936, after the elections had brought Miguel Mariano Gomez to the presidency of Cuba. At the meeting Roca explained the new direction the party would take. He accused Germany, Italy, and Japan of unilateral aggression and noted the lack of a united front of democratic nations to counteract the three powers in the case they took other more serious steps threatening the peace. He said that despite the current lack of aggression between Germany and the Soviet Union, the Germans were still a considerable danger. He cited Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, whose governments were friendly with Germany but who all still felt the advances of German militarism. From there, he criticized the democratic governments for not joining with the communists in the U.S.S.R. in a front for peace and against fascism. He then explained the new tactic of the Popular Front to the committee. He argued against the policy of isolation that kept the party from entering coalitions with even like-minded groups, and called for the communists to take the lead in inviting other oppositionist groups to join a united front. After he laid out the international plan of a union against fascism, Blas Roca turned to the issue of implementing the Popular Front on a national basis. In the same way that Dimitrov suggested the national parties make alliances with other national parties, Blas Roca pushed for a coalition of parties within Cuba that with their strength in numbers might be able to overthrow Batista, as the PCC considered Batista their enemy and the source of reaction during this time.<sup>91</sup> His propositions received some criticism as inter-party

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<sup>91</sup> Alonso Avila and Garcia Montes, 208.

cooperation was long anathema to communist directives. However, according to Roca, it was clear to most that Batista was too strong to bring down all alone.<sup>92</sup>

By this point, the shift in the PCC had begun. Blas Roca and Fabio Grobart, the Comintern representative on the island, spent much of their time attending meetings with local leaders, imploring them to accept the new strategy propagated by Moscow. No longer would the party be on an ideological island constantly at war with other groups. However, the entrance of the PCC into a coalition with other opposition groups would still have to jump some hurdles. In March 1936, Blas Roca and Fabio Grobart were taken into custody and charged with the perpetration of anti-government activities for meeting with a youth leader in Havana. To their luck, no one recognized them as leaders of the PCC, and they received sentences of only six months in jail. While Roca and Grobart were serving their terms, Martín Castellanos acted as the secretary general of the party. A long time member of the PCC, he had extreme views. Under him, the party fell into disorganization, and because of his radicalism, actually farther away from achieving the Popular Front.

Castellanos threw aside the goals of the advancement of the workers and concentrated his work on the creation of a united front against Batista. At a conference in Miami, Castellanos addressed a group consisting of delegates from the *Auténtico* party, the *Organizacion Insurreccional Auténtico*, the ABC, *Joven Cuba*, *Legion Revolucionaria*, *Izquierda Revolucionaria*, and *Organizacion Revolucionaria Cubana Anti-Imperialista*. In his speech he strongly supported the idea of the Popular Front to the extent that he offended the other parties present. His plan called for suspension of all

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<sup>92</sup> Blas Roca, *La Unidad Vancera Al Fascismo* (Havana: Ediciones Sociales, 1939) 29-30.

social goals in efforts to overthrow Batista. Other parties abandoned the conference as no clear agreement could be made, and the PCC suffered further isolation.

When Blas Roca and Fabio Grobart were released from jail, they immediately convoked a meeting of the party. Resolving the crisis in the ranks that had grown from Castellanos's handling of the new line became their goal. They attacked Castellanos's one-dimensional focus on the overthrow of Batista and instead argued for a coalition of workers excluding the bourgeoisie but still in opposition to Batista. At the end of the conference, Fabio Grobart noted the continued illegality of the PCC and called for the creation of a party that could make legal protests against the government and openly join other oppositionist groups.<sup>93</sup>

At the same time that the PCC rid itself of the disastrous influence of Martin Castellanos, the intellectual community in Cuba underwent a slide to the left. Writers such as Ramon Vasconcelos and Nicolás Guillen, who were of the higher classes but gravitated toward revolutionary causes, created prose and poetry that celebrated the left. Though they called themselves progressives, they subtly supported communist ideas. These men along with others such as Juan Marinello, Enrique Serpa, and Luis Felipe Rodríguez made up the group Partido Union Revolucionaria (PUR). The party's name clearly expressed the ideas upon which the PUR was founded. Its members sought a united front of revolutionary parties to combat Batista. Blas Roca saw the significance of the PUR and noted the "strength of their spirit." As the PUR grew, the communists became more involved in it until it was commonly known to be under communist control. Most of the PCC's peripheral organizations such as the *Liga Anti-Imperialista* and the

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<sup>93</sup> Avila and Montes 185-87.

*Asociation de Jovenes del Pueblo* made pacts with the PUR. Under assumed names that bore no connection to the PCC, several associations and periodicals were founded to disseminate the group's ideas to the public in various fashions. It seemed that through this organ the communists might be able to attain their goal of joining a coalition with other oppositionist groups.

The next party congress, the "*Plenum Revolucionaro*," was held in Miami in July of 1937. The *Partido Union Revolucionaria* and the *Liga Anti-Imperialista* attended the conference as fronts for the PCC, as did most of the other oppositionist groups. All parties supported the idea of a front against Batista, but new lines were drawn in the sand. Grau made a speech at the conference where he firmly denounced the PUR for being a puppet of the PCC and said he would refuse to enter any coalition with the PUR as it would be the same as a coalition with the communists.<sup>94</sup> Grau's reluctance to join a coalition with the PCC may also be traced to the futile last-minute agreement that the party made with Machado in the summer of 1933 to end the strike and prevent his downfall, or their refusal of support for the Grau government during the end of 1933, at the time when it might have saved Grau's presidency. Whatever the case, Blas Roca saw Grau and his party as the biggest obstacle to the creation of a democratic block opposed to Batista. He claimed that by excluding the PCC, Grau "destroyed the block and separated the revolutionary sectors within."<sup>95</sup>

As 1937 came to a close, it became increasingly clear to the PCC that there would be no cooperation between the revolutionary parties opposed to Batista. Even so, the PCC had made an important shift. In response to the new strategy delineated at the

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<sup>94</sup> Roca, 26-27.

<sup>95</sup> Roca, 29-30.

Seventh Congress, the communists altered their position greatly concerning cooperation with other groups. At one time, the party had been one of staunch isolationists, so much so that it stood by, opposed to all sides, while the Grau government succumbed to military rule. By the end of 1937, the PCC had turned 180 degrees in its position. It reorganized into a party that called for unity with the loudest voice. When it was once the PCC who refused cooperation among oppositionist parties when it was called for in late 1933 and early 1934, by 1937 it was Grau who refused the olive branch extended by the communists. The PCC was politically isolated and not by its own choosing. However, gestures made by Batista would invite cooperation with some of the revolutionary parties. In the next section, the path that led Batista to move toward the communists will be explored.

## **The Apparent Shift in Batista's Attitude Towards the Communist Party**

When examining the years from mid-1935 until 1940, the period when Batista consolidated his power and guided Cuba along a path to electoral politics, some historians claim that he underwent a shift in his political leanings; he converted from a military dictator into a social reformer.<sup>96</sup> At least one historian claimed that Batista turned to this new direction so as to clean up his legacy and not be remembered in the same vein as his predecessor, Machado.<sup>97</sup> This section is entitled “The Apparent Shift in Batista’s Attitude towards the Communist Party” because he certainly seemed to change. Violent clashes became less frequent and his methods gave the impression of change. Whereas Batista once used military repression in getting his goals accomplished, he used the military after 1935 to provide social services. If one closely examines Batista’s record of social legislation, one will find that he in fact did not undergo a political change of heart but only continued the work that was begun by the sergeants and students in September of 1933 once he had restored order.

Batista was one among nineteen signatories of the first “Proclamation of the Revolutionaries” drafted on the night of 4 September 1933 by Sergio Carbó. This document outlined the reorganization of the government and economy of Cuba based on principles of “justice and in accordance with the most modern conception of democracy.”

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<sup>96</sup> Thomas, *Cuba : Or, the Pursuit of Freedom* 707; Pérez, *Cuba : Between Reform and Revolution* 278.

<sup>97</sup> Alexander, 277.



It outlined the progressive political program that the revolutionaries intended to implement.<sup>98</sup> Once Grau ascended to the presidency, the tide of a new Cuba was irresistible. His government promised a series of reforms that included the eight-hour workday, autonomy to the university, women's suffrage, a minimum wage law, and a law that decreed that 50% of all employees of any firm must be Cuban citizens. He also declared agrarian reform as a top priority and promised the peasantry legal rights to their land.<sup>99</sup> Even after Batista deposed Grau, the reforms instituted between September 1933 and January 1934 remained in effect. For example, during the chaos of the strike of March 1935, the government still cited firms for violating the minimum wage and eight-hour workday laws.<sup>100</sup> If Batista was keeping the reformist spirit alive during a time of violent social conflict, then there is no reason to believe that when the situation was calmed he would not continue the social legislation.

That is exactly what he did. In February and March of 1936 Batista pushed his legislation forward. During this time, President Mendieta resigned because of a squabble with the opposition over the upcoming elections. Jose M. Barnet, a career diplomat and a virtual unknown to the Cuban population, assumed the position of provisional president until elections could be held. Real authority, however, resided with Batista. The colonel took the opportunity to push through several programs, making the military the largest provider of social services on the island. Among them was the National Association for Public Assistance, a service established to assure the poor of medical treatment and the Technical Public Health Service, charged with creating and maintaining sanitary code

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<sup>98</sup> Raul Roa, *Retorno a La Alborada* (Havana: 1964) 62.

<sup>99</sup> Whitney, 103.

<sup>100</sup> Jefferson Caffery, "To Cordell Hull," 13 March 1935, ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

and keeping track of health statistics. He also established the National Tuberculosis Council and the founded Civic-Military Institute, the aims of the former being obvious; the latter sought to aid children who had lost parents due to work accidents be they in industry, the police or military.

The most well-known and controversial social legislation Batista pushed through was the Civic-Military Rural School program. Instituted on 27 February 1936, the program allowed the army to construct, run, and maintain schools throughout the Cuban countryside. The schools would be run by sergeants who spread across the interior sometimes providing the communities with their first encounter with formal education. The sergeants would focus on basic learning skills and include some instruction on agriculture, hygiene, and nutrition. The sergeant-teachers opened the schools to children during the day and to adults at night. By the end of the decade an estimated 100,000 people were served by the program.<sup>101</sup>

The program was not controversial because of its goals but because of its methods and means of implementation. The new president, Miguel Mariano Gomez, elected in December 1936, saw it as an encroachment on civil power by the military. He alleged: it was like “a tumor, not dangerous now, but capable of becoming dangerous in the future.” Batista, for his part, claimed that the program would aid the population and create “better Cuban citizens.”<sup>102</sup> The president eventually lost much of his support among the people, congress, and press because of his opposition to the program.<sup>103</sup> When the army sponsored a tax of nine cents per bag of sugar to fund the school program, Gomez

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<sup>101</sup> Argote-Freyre, 203-218.

<sup>102</sup> Associated Press, "Cuban Crisis Seen in Sugar Tax Fight," *New York Times* 17 December 1936: 1.

<sup>103</sup> J.D. Phillips, "Cuba Is Anxious in Civil-Army Rift: Talks of President's Resignation," *New York Times* 18 December 1936: 1, 14.

protested. The Senate already passed the measure; soon the House of Representatives would as well, leaving Gomez without any support when he vetoed the bill. In the fallout the Cuban Congress impeached Gomez.

Some have claimed that the offering of social services at the behest of the military amounted to a power grab by Batista and that it was a further insertion of military authority into civil affairs.<sup>104</sup> However, other motives must be examined as well. First, it should be remembered that Batista came from the countryside and was familiar with its problems. Much of the legislation, especially that concerning tuberculosis, sanitation, and education, targeted the island's interior. In a speech in Oriente province, the island's remote and eastern state, he told his audience that his programs were there "to educate, to teach and prevent, to shape the mind of ignorant men, women and children." When asked why he chose to concern himself with non-military issues he responded, "Because there is a conscience and there are convictions."<sup>105</sup>

Batista's use of the military in his social programs should also be viewed as an example of his pragmatism. In the past, it had been difficult to find civilian teachers who were willing to go into the interior. Those who were assigned there frequently had enough political influence to get themselves transferred to a more urban area.<sup>106</sup> Sergeants, however, were stationed in the district in which they taught. They were forced to live there until their term of enlistment was up, and they were subject to military discipline. They were an educated and reliable workforce and were at Batista's leisure to command. The Civic-Rural Military School program must be seen as another instance

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<sup>104</sup> Thomas, *Cuba : Or, the Pursuit of Freedom* 702., Argote-Freyre, 217.

<sup>105</sup> Associated Press, "Batista Defends Rural School Program," *New York Times* 16 December 1936: 3.

<sup>106</sup> Argote-Freyre, 219.

when the military under Batista picked up where the civilian authority could not or would not provide the service in question. It should be remembered along side the soldiers who ran the cable cars, trains, and other public services in Havana during the strike of March 1935.

In June of 1937, Batista unveiled the most ambitious and, according to some analysts, the oddest plan for social reform ever dreamed of on the island. The Triennial Plan, as it became known, took the spirit of the reforms of the previous year and expanded it to a three-year program with a plethora of goals ranging from agrarian reform to labor benefits to cultural pursuits. "It was a document of youthful idealism," commented one historian.<sup>107</sup> Batista was but thirty-six and sat at the top of a government wielding the power to enact great social change effecting millions and felt the need to do so. The plan resulted from several months of consultations with civilian experts from around the island and from a multitude of professions. The final version, as related to Dr. José I. Rivero of the Havana daily *Diario de la Marina*, included among its many programs:

- 1) Creation of a national Bank
- 2) Establishment of library system around the island
- 3) Tax reform
- 4) Reforestation
- 5) Health insurance for working mothers
- 6) Accident insurance for all workers
- 7) A reform of the relations between those parties involved in sugar production<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Argote-Freyre, 247.

<sup>108</sup> José I. Rivero, "El Coronel Batista Expone Al Dr. José I. Rivero, En Una Transcendental Entrevista, Un Vasto Plan, Ya En Marche, De Amplia Reconstrucción Y De Equilibrio Social," *Diario de la Marina* 20 June 1937 1937: 1.

The Sugar Coordination Law, passed in 1937, was the most important piece of legislation and received the most immediate attention. Like many of the proposed measures, it strongly favored the interests of labor and small industry over those of large firms. It created a government body to arbitrate problems between large estates and small producers and guaranteed small producers a minimum quota and price for their sugar. Also, it gave legal title over the land to those who worked it, protecting the small *colonos* from unexpected eviction.<sup>109</sup> The sugar legislation was the most significant feature of the Triennial Plan and the one that met with the highest degree of implementation. The rest of the plan was eventually seen as an obstacle to the calls for a constitutional convention, and Batista withdrew it from consideration in May 1938 when he converted the plan into a platform for his presidential campaign in 1940.

If one looks at Batista's record on social legislation, it becomes clear that, contrary to what might be expected from a so-called elitist reactionary, he consistently worked for the betterment of Cuba's working class. His decision to stay the course charted by the students during Grau's brief term in office, even when his government was locked in a bitter struggle with those same students, exemplified his determination. Many of the decree-laws issued in 1933 were enforced through the end of Batista's term in office, and definitely benefited the workers.<sup>110</sup> The rural school program and the Triennial Plan reflect Batista's continuing efforts to aid the working class. Instead of a shift in attitude that made the arrangement with the PCC possible, this paper contends that Batista actually remained constant in his commitment to social reforms. From the

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<sup>109</sup> Jefferson Caffery, "To Cordell Hull," 21 June 1937, ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

<sup>110</sup> Coert Du Bios, "Report to Ambassador Caffery on social legislation" August 1, 1935, ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

beginning of his time in power, when there was a problem such as the strike of 1935 or a need, such as the lack of education in the interior, Batista always turned to the army to provide a solution. Whether it was driving taxis in Havana, or teaching in a schoolhouse in Oriente, the army reliably acted as Batista's tool of action. Batista also supported legislation that aided the poor and working classes of Cuba throughout his time in office, establishing his commitment to social reform and exhibiting his ideological steadfastness.

## The Wedding of Batista and the Communists

By 1937, when Batista launched the Triennial Plan, the Comintern had implemented the Popular Front around the world, including in Cuba. The party was in search of allies. For most of the 1930's the target of communist propaganda had been Batista. They castigated him as a corrupt, fascist dictator. But in Cuban politics, former friends sometimes attack each other, and former enemies sometimes embrace.<sup>111</sup> The Communist Party no doubt had taken notice of the wild popularity that Batista had recently gained among many of its partisans. Batista attended rallies in sugar growing areas and was received by thousands of workers and farmers.<sup>112</sup> Batista's social reforms had gained him the support of the masses. At the same time, the colonel, who was considering a run at the presidency in 1940, saw the isolated position of the PCC. The party had repeatedly sought alliances with the *Auténticos* and had been turned down every time. Here, Batista made his first tentative overtures towards the revolutionary parties. In 1937, when it became clear that the PUR was a front for the as yet illegal PCC, Batista did nothing to keep it from organizing. In fact, the PUR participated in a conference in July that was designed to build a coalition against Batista. By November of the same year, a bill was in front of congress that proposed to allow the return of all political exiles. The amnesty was well received all over the island and provided Batista a

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<sup>111</sup> Argote-Freyre, 252.

<sup>112</sup> Associated Press, "Cuban Crisis Seen in Sugar Tax Fight."

method of reconciliation with some of the oppositionist parties.<sup>113</sup> After noting the warm reception of such offers, Batista made the first direct gesture to the communists. Using his old friend and Mexican Ambassador Octavio Reyes Spíndola as a go-between, Batista made further steps toward an alliance with the party. The first meeting may have taken place as early as January 1938.<sup>114</sup> They continued through the spring and apparently went well enough to persuade Batista to allow the publication of the communist daily, *Noticias de Hoy*, which he did in May. Two months later, the PCC celebrated its tenth Plenum, and the first without attacks on Batista. At that conference, the communists resolved to “adopt a more positive attitude toward Colonel Batista, compelling him, by means of it, to take yet more democratic positions.”<sup>115</sup> Two weeks after the Plenum two leaders of the PCC, Blas Roca and Joaquin Ordoqui, attended a meeting at Camp Columbia at which they and Batista finalized the arrangement. The final details of an alliance between the communists and Batista were discussed and agreed upon, but it is unlikely that anyone not present at the meeting knows the exact wording of the alliance. The general terms, however, are clear. Batista would allow the communists to act as a legal party and reorganize the labor movement under their control. In return, the communists would support Batista in the election of 1940.<sup>116</sup> A week later Batista was quoted as saying, “The Communist party, according to its constitution, is a democratic party which pursues its ends within the framework of a capitalist regime and renounces violence as a political means and consequently it is entitled to the same status as that of

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<sup>113</sup> Pérez, *Cuba : Between Reform and Revolution* 278.

<sup>114</sup> Argote-Freyre, 254.

<sup>115</sup> Alexander, 278.

<sup>116</sup> Avila and Montes, 200-01



any other party in Cuba.” The party was legalized shortly thereafter, on 25 September 1938 and was firmly in the Batista camp.<sup>117</sup>

The two sides finally came together to form a union that would carry Batista to the presidency and last throughout his presidential term. The union was the product of the continuation of pro-labor policies by which he earned the support of the masses and made him more plausible as an ally for the communists who embraced the Popular Front in response to growing fears of fascism. The two sides needed allies to attain or maintain power, and they saw in each other similar policies and possible political clout. The political situation in the last years of the 1930's pushed Batista and the Cuban Communist Party together. Ironically, Grau and the *Auténticos* had a hand in creating the coalition that would defeat them in the elections of 1940.

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<sup>117</sup> Thomas, *Cuba : Or, the Pursuit of Freedom* , 710.

**The Marriage of Convenience: 1938-1944**  
**Batista and the Communists' Mutual Support**

The next section of this paper will look at the major events between the summer of 1938, when the two parties formally joined forces, and the end of Batista's presidential term in 1944. It will examine to what extent the PCC supported Batista on key issues of the day as well as what influence party goals had on Batista's policies. Further, it will look at the PCC's top priority, the establishment of the Cuban labor confederation, the *Confederacion de Trabajadores de Cuba* (CTC), and evaluate Batista's attitude toward and support or lack thereof for it. By looking at the flow of support going both ways, the issues that were concrete conditions to the pact and those that remained open to debate should come to light.

### **The Founding and Legalization of the *Confederacion de Trabajadores de Cuba***

For the first time since its founding, the PCC could breathe the air of legality. Having secured Batista's blessing, the party was able to work openly towards its goal of the unification of the labor movement under one banner. It was obvious that that banner could not be that of the CNOC. The central labor body had been badly damaged during the years of repression from 1934 until 1937. Many of its members and leaders were either killed in demonstrations or riots or exiled because of them. The organization remained in existence, but it was clear that a new organization would be necessary to unify the workers. Preliminary steps toward this goal became the first public act of the party after legalization. In September 1938, Lázaro Cárdenas and Lombardo Toledano, two men of clear Marxist sympathies, invited Cuban labor leaders to participate in the constitutional assembly of the *Confederacion de Trabajadores de la American Latina* (CTAL). The Cubans sent a delegation representing twelve labor organizations of reformist and communist intentions.

The Congress of Mexico, as it became known, began on 25 September 1938 and not only succeeded in creating the CTAL, but also adopted various resolutions concerning labor movements internationally. Several directly or indirectly concerned Cuba. Before any of the resolutions had been advanced for discussion, Cuban communist leader Lázaro Peña motioned that the Congress must take note of the "democratic

changes that were starting to take effect in Cuba.”<sup>118</sup> In making such a motion he was attempting to aim the resolutions away from the radical so as not to offend Batista, as his blessing could do far more for the Cuban party than could that of the CTAL. In the end the most important resolutions suggested the constitution of committees to direct the struggle of the workers with a common platform and the worldwide unification of the working class.<sup>119</sup>

The spirit of unity and reform did not end with the adoption of the resolutions but continued, notably in the Cuban delegation. In the atmosphere of celebration and class solidarity, the Cubans put aside their previous differences and joined together in efforts to create a central Cuban labor union. They put their words onto paper on 22 September 1938 in a document called the “Pact of Mexico” or the “Pact of Honor.” They vowed “under the banner of class struggle, to construct as soon as possible a national central union in the republic of Cuba and to celebrate in Cuba a national workers unification congress.”<sup>120</sup>

Upon their return from Mexico, the communist leaders immediately went to work preparing for a labor meeting on a national scale. They formed a committee, headed by Ángel Cofiño and Lázaro Peña, with the intent of spreading their message to other organizations and to draw support from outside the PCC itself. Throughout November and December the PCC staged provincial meetings with the aim of mobilizing its local chapters. Cofiño and Peña’s committee was successful in getting positive responses from

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<sup>118</sup> Efrén Córdova, *Clase Trabajadora Y Movimiento Sindical En Cuba*, Colección Cuba Y Sus Jueces., 1. ed. (Miami, FL, USA: Ediciones Universal, 1995) 216-31.

<sup>119</sup> Confederación de Trabajadores de la America Latina. *Resoluciones de sus Asembleas*. Mexico, 1949.

<sup>120</sup> Córdova, 231.

the other labor groups they contacted, nearly all of whom attended the national congress. Finally on 23 January 1939, the meeting was held, first in the meeting place of the *Sociedad El Pilar* and later, on 28 January, in the more spacious *Teatro Nacional* in Havana. Some 1500 delegates attended the congress representing up to 789 different labor organizations, many not of communist leanings.<sup>121</sup> Grau's *Auténticos*, the bitter enemy of the PCC, were represented at the congress. Those present elected Ramón León Rentería as president of the proceedings.

The major work of the congress was the dissolution of the CNOOC and the creation in its place of the *Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba* (CTC). The new confederation would unite the industrial, agricultural, business, and service unions under one leadership. At the same time, the delegates rejected pluralism in the movement, declaring that only one union could exist in any place of business. Concerning its internal structure, the CTC would have a biannual congress that would hold the ultimate authority. So as to act as a daily governing body, a national council of 55 persons and an executive committee composed of 15 secretaries would be created.<sup>122</sup>

When it came time to elect the executive committee, communists, or those closely associated with the party, won the key positions and controlled the most significant constituent unions. Lázaro Peña won the seat of the Secretary General. By his side were other communists, such as Carlos Fernández, Apolinar Díaz Castillo, and Justo Tomayo. The communist allies, Jesús Menéndez, Juan Arévalo, and Ángel Cofiño also won seats. In all, the communists held eighteen seats on the executive committee; the *Auténticos*

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<sup>121</sup> The exact number of organizations represented varies by source with 567 being the smallest number represented and 789 being the largest.

<sup>122</sup> Córdova, 232.

held fourteen, and the independents held four.<sup>123</sup> While the committee was made up primarily of communists, it still represented the majority of vocations on the island and was more ideologically mixed than might have been expected. This opened to the group new horizons in its programs and made it more dynamic. Importantly, it also helped make the CTC accessible to more groups, thereby increasing membership.<sup>124</sup>

In addition to the creation of the CTC and ratification of its constitution, the delegates at the first meeting in 1939 adopted several resolutions responding to the most pressing needs of the workers. They resolved, for example, to demand a minimum wage of \$1.50 per day for industrial workers and \$1.20 per day for agricultural workers. Another resolution called for a revision of the Law of Sugar Coordination, and yet another sought to prohibit employers from negotiating with non-unionized labor.<sup>125</sup> These resolutions were nothing new in labor movement rhetoric, but they are important in that they became part of the communist platform in the constituent assembly. Further, their appearance in Batista's demands concerning the constitution suggests the extent to which the communists influenced Batista.

By February 1939, the first workers' congress was over, and it established the CTC. This was all done in full view of the public, and it was no secret to Batista, his government, or the opposition that the communists controlled the CTC. Most of those elected to the executive committee of the CTC were long standing communists. Batista did not protest the communist leadership in the CTC but instead supported it whole-

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<sup>123</sup> Willard Beaulac, "Political and Trade Union Affiliations of the CTC Executive Committee," 2 October 1939, ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

<sup>124</sup> Córdova, 233.

<sup>125</sup> Instituto de Historia del Movimiento Comunista y de la Revolucion Socialista de Cuba, *Historia de Movimiento Obrero Cubano, 1865 – 1958*. Editora Politica, Havana, 1985. vol. 2 p.58.

heartedly. Throughout the period when the PCC was organizing and mobilizing for the constituent convention that would form the CTC, Batista made remarks strongly in its support. As previously noted, Batista touted the right of the party to exist as soon as a week after the July meeting with Blas Roca and Joaquin Ordoqui when he spoke of the party's desire to pursue its goals in the "context of a capitalist state."<sup>126</sup> He spoke in Matanzas in November of 1939 "amidst a great display of red flags and in close relationship with the Communist Party." This demonstration and oration showed Batista's strong support for the communists even as the western world was "indignant over communism" because of the Nazi-Soviet Pact formalized earlier that year.<sup>127</sup> Batista again spoke highly of the PCC upon his return from a visit with Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas in February 1939, calling them the "leaders of democracy."<sup>128</sup>

After the creation of the CTC, Batista continued to speak in favor of the labor confederation. Though the CTC existed, it had yet to receive official recognition. Upon winning the presidency in 1940, Batista established a committee made up of his cabinet members that would study the labor situation and composition of the CTC. Through studying these factors they would make a decision upon the legality of the CTC. Obviously, the committee was likely to decide in favor of recognition as it was made up of men handpicked by Batista. The opposition, led by Senator José Casanova, representing big sugar, demanded that the confederation be under some sort of state control. They argued that the Cuban Congress must have the right to dissolve the CTC if it called for illegal strikes or if it fell under the sway of some undemocratic element. As

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<sup>126</sup> Thomas, *Cuba : Or, the Pursuit of Freedom* 710.

<sup>127</sup> Edward P. Lawton, "To Cordell Hull," 29 November 1939. ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

<sup>128</sup> Córdova, 229.

expected, Batista's committee found in favor of the legal recognition of the CTC, but none was yet offered by the Congress as they reached no consensus.<sup>129</sup>

Over the next year and a half, Batista repeatedly called for the recognition of the CTC. Realizing that the communist element within the CTC was frightening some congressmen away from recognition, Batista suggested that the confederation was not entirely a communist group. He claimed that its ranks were populated by those of leftward intention but the group as a whole was purely democratic.<sup>130</sup> In January of 1941, Batista again dedicated himself to the recognition of the CTC in an article in the magazine *Acción*.<sup>131</sup> The CTC did not receive recognition until April of 1942, but by that time Batista had made many more declarations of support for the organization and submitted two bills to congress with the aim of attaining legal status for the CTC.<sup>132</sup> As well, he supported one bill that was submitted jointly by the communist leaders, Lázaro Peña, Blas Roca, Salvador Garcia Agüero, and Dr. José Maceo.<sup>133</sup>

Batista's unwavering support of the PCC's leading role in the labor movement suggested that such action was a key component of the agreement he had finalized with the PCC in the summer of 1938. The organization of the CTC in full view of the government and under majority control of the PCC, even at a time when most were trying to downplay their communist connections, proved Batista's persistence in supporting the

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<sup>129</sup> Williard Beaulac, "To Cordell Hull," 15 October 1940, ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

<sup>130</sup> George Messersmith "To Cordell Hull," 17 October 1940, ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

<sup>131</sup> George Messersmith "To Cordell Hull," 27 January 1941, ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

<sup>132</sup> Coert Du Bois, "Confidential Memorandum for the Ambassador," 30 October 1940, George Messersmith, "To Cordell Hull," 7 November 1940, ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

<sup>133</sup> George Messersmith, "To Cordell Hull," 17 December 1940, ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.



pact. Further, during the conflict in congress over the recognition of the CTC, Batista devoted himself to its cause, even at the risk of offending the anti-communist United States. In the next section this paper will examine the payback. In return for his support of the PCC's legalization and its leading role in the labor movement, the Communist Party, and thereby, the majority of the working class became staunch partisans and strongly supported Batista in the constitutional convention and elections of 1940.

## The Constitution and Elections of 1940

The drafting of a new Cuban charter had been a priority for Batista since his ascension to power in 1933. He first called for elections of a constituent assembly in September 1933, as a signatory of the *Proclamation of the Revolutionaries* drafted by Sergio Carbó, and again in 1935, just before the labor unrest in March of that year.<sup>134</sup> At both of those instances, however, Batista claimed that the time was not right, as instability would not let any election results stand, nor was there a reasonable chance of a compromise among the clashing parties. There is no reason to believe that Batista had ulterior motives in postponing the elections as he was likely right about the prospects of failure that awaited any assembly during that tumultuous period. By 1939, however, the national situation was calm enough to return to true electoral politics. During the summer of that year, Congress established an electoral tribunal that would oversee all elections. The tribunal desired to see the elections for the constituent assembly and the general elections held as soon as possible, and in that order. After one postponement, the tribunal set the date for the constituent assembly elections for 15 November 1939.

In discussing the Constitution of 1940 it is necessary to keep in mind that the lines for the general elections were already drawn. Therefore, the members of the constituent assembly, while part of a handful of separate political parties, can basically be divided into two camps: those who were pro-government and pro-Batista and those who opposed the government. The government bloc was made up of the *Partido Liberal*, the *Unión*

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<sup>134</sup> Thomas, *Cuba : Or, the Pursuit of Freedom* 693, 98.

*Nacionalista Democrata*, the *Unión Nacionalista*, the *Partido Popular*, the *Partido Revolucionario Cubano Realista*, the *Unión Cubano*, and the *Partido Comunista de Cuba*. The opposition bloc was composed of the *Democrata Republicano*, the *Acción Republicana*, the *Unión Revolucionario*, the *Agrario Nacional*, the *Partido Revolucionario Cubano*, (*Auténticos*), the *ABC*, and finally independent socialists. It is important to note this because in writing the constitution, the delegates basically adopted the platform of their respective candidates for president.

Both sides agreed that the elections were fair.<sup>135</sup> The opposition bloc originally claimed a victory with forty-one of the seventy-six possible seats. The *Auténticos* gained the most seats with eighteen, the *Democrata Republicano* gained fifteen seats, while *Acción Republicana* and the *ABC* took four seats each. The other groups, the *Unión Revolucionario*, the *Agrario Nacional*, and the independent socialists did not win any seats and were basically absorbed by the other parties. Of the thirty-five seats won by the government block, the *Partido Liberal* won the most seats with sixteen, the *Nacionalistas* won nine seats, the *PCC* gained six, and the *Realistas* took one seat. The opposition cheered their apparent victory over the government block. Batista showed his democratic credentials by not using the military to sway the election results. However, the opposition victory was short-lived.

Mario Menocal, former president of Cuba and the leader of *Democrata Republicano*, the group he founded after he broke with his longtime party, *Partido Liberal*, was the prototypical “traditional politician.” He seemed at odds with the Grau coalition which chose to label itself as “revolutionary.” Even though Menocal and

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<sup>135</sup> George Messersmith, “To Cordell Hull,” 16 November 1939, ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

Batista were adversaries, no bad blood existed between the two. Soon after the elections, Menocal made apparent his willingness to join the camp of which ever side could offer his party the most in the upcoming general elections. In the negotiations for Menocal's support and his party's fifteen seats in the constituent assembly, Batista offered a better deal. For the price of switching his support to the government bloc, Menocal received the right to choose the coalition's candidates for vice-president, the mayor of Havana, the governorship of three of the six provinces, and twelve senate seats. Within days, Grau renounced his elected position of president of the assembly because he no longer had the support necessary to retain it. This gave the government coalition nearly total control over the assembly. The new majority elected Dr. Carlos Marquez Sterling as the head of the proceedings.<sup>136</sup>

Debate over the new constitution began on 8 February 1940 and lasted through June 1940. It was signed on 1 July and was to go into effect on 1 October, just before the new president would take office on 10 October. The document the delegates produced was touted as one of the most advanced charters in Latin America. It provided for political freedoms such as obligatory suffrage for all those aged twenty and above and the use of the referendum. It outlawed political movements based on race, sex, or class and in general, "envisaged the state as playing a positive role in economic and social development."<sup>137</sup>

Concerning social legislation, it contained all the same laws that had been called for since 1933, and more recently demanded in the constituent convention of the CTC. Compulsory social insurance, accident compensation, minimum wage, pensions, the

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<sup>136</sup> Argote-Freyre, 270.

<sup>137</sup> Thomas, *Cuba : Or, the Pursuit of Freedom* 720.

eight-hour work day, and forty-four hour work week were all included in its articles as was a paid vacation lasting one month. The framers included other labor laws, such as the right to strike and the right to be paid only in the national currency.<sup>138</sup> The clauses involving workers' rights were so numerous as to provoke one Mexican observer to call the Cuban Constitution "the most advanced in America concerning matters of labor."<sup>139</sup>

The PCC's response to the Constitution was generally favorable. Nearly all of the demands for the betterment of working conditions the communists had made in their various congresses were addressed. Blas Roca said the Constitution "closed the revolutionary cycle which began in 1933" and that it "confirm[ed] the most important conquests of the revolutionary period."<sup>140</sup> More specifically, the PCC made several demands during the convention about issues they particularly wanted included or omitted from the document. They were decidedly against beginning the preamble with a prayer or any reference to God or Christianity. Like their partisans the world over, the Cuban communists held to an atheistic doctrine in matters of spirituality. Also they wanted to extend the right of the government to confiscate goods beyond what the rest of the convention wanted. Further, the communist constituents were against the inclusion of a resolution of sympathy for the people of Finland (which had recently been invaded by the Soviet Union) and against a clause that prohibited the existence of a party which was under the influence of another sovereign power. On all of these issues, with the exception of the last (which could have led to the PCC's dissolution), the communists were defeated. The communist acquiescence on these points is most significant here.

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<sup>138</sup> Cuban Constitution of 1940, Title VI, Section I. Latin American Studies.org. 23 June 2006 <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/constitution-1940.htm>.

<sup>139</sup> Mario de la Cueva, *Derecho Mexicana Del Trabajo*, fourth ed. (Mexico City: 1949) 188.

<sup>140</sup> Blas Roca, *El Pueblo Y La Nueva Constitución* (Havana: 1940) 18.

Now as part of the Batista coalition, the PCC apparently saw it more valuable to compromise and retain their prospects for electoral power than to fight to the finish and leave the coalition. Moreover, their willingness to concede these points along with Blas Roca's praise for the Constitution upon its completion suggested that the party was not at all disposed to leaving the coalition. It also suggested that communist support of the government coalition concerning the Constitution and general elections formed part of their summer 1938 arrangement.

When Batista negotiated to bring Menocal into his coalition, it was not because he was terribly concerned about the make up of the constituent assembly. Though the assembly could have kept him out of the presidential election, as some representatives tried to do by unsuccessfully attempting to elevate the minimum age for election to forty-five, it was not his main concern. The two sides were close enough ideologically that either camp would have produced a similar document. An examination of the constitutional platforms of the two parties that garnered the largest number of seats, the *Liberales* for the government coalition and the *Auténticos* for the opposition, revealed that the most significant difference was found in their visions of the laws connected with rights to strike and to lock out employees. The government bloc pushed for a stance that benefited the worker more than the employer, but even on this the two sides were not on completely opposite sides of the spectrum.<sup>141</sup> Instead, Batista feared his defeat in the constituent assembly was a harbinger of the general elections. He realized that he could beat Grau or Menocal separately but that together they wielded enough electoral clout to

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<sup>141</sup> Arturo Manas, "Platforms of Parties in Constituent Assembly," 5 October 1939, ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

keep him out of office.<sup>142</sup> There lay his motive for bringing Menocal into the government coalition even in the face of opposition from his present allies, the strongest of which came from the Communist Party. On the surface, the communists resisted the Batista-Menocal pact because they claimed he represented reactionary ideals and his inclusion would kill the socially conscience spirit of the coalition. This complaint had some validity, but at its core was little more than lip service. The communist opposition to Menocal stemmed from the deal it took to get him. The communists had hoped that many of the candidacies that were given to Menocal in return for his joining the coalition would be given to their partisans. The communists originally had their eye on positions such as the mayor of Havana, several senatorial seats, and even the vice-presidency. Unfortunately for them, the right to choose candidates for these positions was promised to Menocal. However, the PCC took what some may have called a betrayal in stride and continued to support Batista as fervently as any party in the government block.

By the late 1930's, Cuban communism was strongly identified with racial equality. One U.S. observer noted that communism on the island had "to a large degree taken the form of a racial struggle."<sup>143</sup> Until almost 1930, racial concerns were conspicuously absent from the PCC's agenda. But, after the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern in 1928 they became the center piece of the party's initiatives. Afro-Cubans and mestizos attained positions of power within the party, the first being a black cellular secretary in the early 1930's. Later, men such as the Afro-Cuban militant, Antolín Dickinson Abreu, who rose to leadership in the SNOIA and the mulatto, Blas Roca, a

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<sup>142</sup> Argote-Freyre, 269.

<sup>143</sup> Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) 193.

longtime secretary general of the PCC, gained power and prominence. By 1934, the PCC gave its full attention to the “black question.” It started a campaign for racial equality and against all forms of discrimination, economic, political, and social. The PCC denounced racism in the United States and used it to cultivate anti-imperialist feelings. One example was the condemnation of the death sentence imposed on nine African Americans in Scottsboro, Alabama. The PCC printed a circular noting the “fierce oppression exercised by the Yankee capitalist magnates against blacks.”<sup>144</sup> Further, when the *Liga Juvenil Comunista* denounced Welles’s mediation in 1933, the called specifically for Afro-Cubans to act. “You will be more oppressed and discriminated against by the military boot of the American bourgeoisie that endeavor to assassinate the young Negroes of Scottsboro. Struggle together with the white native workers for your national liberty.”<sup>145</sup> These examples suggest that the communist leadership recognized the power that resided in the Afro-Cuban and racially mixed populations and actively attempted to use it for their own purposes.

Consistent with this position, the PCC channeled its energy towards aiding Batista in his efforts to gain the vote of Afro-Cubans and Cuban Mestizos.<sup>146</sup> Party members organized massive gatherings where Afro-Cuban music was featured and strong drink flowed freely. At the events it became popular for the attendees to wear red handkerchiefs around their necks as a symbol of support for Batista and the PCC. The communists used Batista’s own mixed racial heritage so as to win the vote of Cuba’s Mestizo population. They even went so far as to publish a retouched picture of Batista

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<sup>144</sup> De la Fuente, 192.

<sup>145</sup> De la Fuente, 192.

<sup>146</sup> De la Fuente, 215.



altered to emphasize his indigenous features. The communists did exactly the opposite to Grau. They searched for and found pictures of him that were terribly unflattering. Members of the party's propaganda machine copied thousands of times over pictures in which Grau appeared dimwitted or as having evil intentions and distributed them to their followers in Havana and the interior from the back of Batista's campaign train, the "Train of Victory."<sup>147</sup>

When the elections were finally celebrated on 14 June 1940, the Communist Party's work did indeed pay off. Batista won the Afro-Cuban and Mestizo vote by a hefty margin. Members of the party itself also were quite dedicated to Batista. The PCC and its offshoot, the *Union Revolucionaria Comunista* (URC), the successor of the PUR, accounted for 90,000 possible voters in late 1939.<sup>148</sup> Even if one accounts for growth of the parties that may have occurred by the elections in June of the following year, it is still not difficult to say that the 73,000 votes cast by members of the two organizations for Batista represented a sizable majority of the two ideologically linked parties.<sup>149</sup> Also one must not forget the influence that the PCC had over the CTC. By the time of the elections the CTC represented over 200,000 workers. United States embassy officials considered the CTC membership, by way of its communist leadership, to be among Batista's most enthusiastic supporters. The proportion of pro-Batista voters among the

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<sup>147</sup> José A. Duarte Oropesa, *Historiología Cubana*, Colección Cuba Y Sus Jueces (Miami, Fla.: Ediciones Universal, 1974) 567.

<sup>148</sup> Willard Beaulac, "To Cordell Hull," 1 November 1939, ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

<sup>149</sup> Thomas, Cuba : Or, the Pursuit of Freedom 722.

ranks of the CTC was quite high and in combination with the votes Batista received from members of the PCC and URC, gave Batista the elections.<sup>150</sup>

The circumstances surrounding the elections of 1940, like those surrounding the Constitution and the founding of the CTC suggest that the elections must have been a major point in the agreement made between Batista and the Communist Party in July 1938. Just as Batista dedicated himself to the legal recognition of the communist-controlled CTC and was willing to compromise his own position within Cuba and with the United States, leaders of the Communist Party accepted the omission of the constitutional issues they wanted addressed and the loss of the candidacies they hoped to fill and continued to support Batista completely. It is safe to say that the Batista-Communist pact hinged on these issues. In the next sections, this paper will examine the limits of the pact by discussing two issues where Batista and the communists still clashed.

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<sup>150</sup> Willard Beaulac, "To Cordell Hull," 27 May 1940, ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

## **The Continuation of Labor Unrest Led by the Communists And Cuban Involvement in World War II**

So as to get a better idea of where the limits of the Batista-Communist Pact could be found, it is necessary to look at some points of contention that still existed in the atmosphere of cordiality. One such sore spot was the continuation of labor unrest still perpetuated by communists or by the communist-controlled CTC. The *Charge d’Affairs* in the American Embassy in Havana, Willard Beaulac held the opinion that “never before had Cuban labor been so organized.” It seems that, the pact with Batista notwithstanding, workers still desired better conditions and saw themselves in a unique position to attain further improvements in their standard of living. As late as January 1940, the CTC was responsible for the shutdown of eight sugar mills in Camagüey as well as a graphic arts strike which closed several printing presses.<sup>151</sup> According to Decree-Law Three of 6 February 1934, the strikes were illegal as the strikers failed to follow the guidelines set out in the language.<sup>152</sup> Yet, the strikes went on. In fact, they were still going on in December 1940 when Lázaro Peña, a communist leader and Secretary General of the CTC, and Juan Arévalo, a communist ally, submitted a list of demands calling for better working conditions beyond what had been called for in the social legislation sections of

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<sup>151</sup> Willard Beaulac, “To Cordell Hull,” 19 January 1940, ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

<sup>152</sup> Willard Beaulac, “To Cordell Hull,” 18 January 1940, ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

the Constitution.<sup>153</sup> Violence even broke out between police and communist demonstrators protesting a bill introduced into Congress that would outlaw the party, by asserting that it was a danger to national security.<sup>154</sup>

Conflicts such as these prove that the PCC did not entirely defer to Batista even though their relationship was quite cozy. Each side still had its own agenda, and the PCC still stuck to its old methods of strikes and demonstrations. The sagacity of Batista's deal with the party came into question and caused some to wonder whether the party was more powerful even than the President. The communists, however, never openly assaulted Batista nor did they ever toy with the idea of withdrawing their support. These issues shed new light on the Batista-Communist pact. They showed neither side was obliged to support the other in all situations. Autonomy was maintained by either side. As well, it showed the elasticity of the pact. Even if the two sides found themselves on different sides of an issue, they could maintain their differences as long as they were not directly antagonistic to one another. Cuban involvement in World War II would serve as a test of the accord that would further prove its durability.

The Communist Party had long been the proponents of an anti-fascist platform. As World War II loomed, it seemed that there would be little conflict between the PCC and Batista concerning the issue. However, the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, signed on 23 August 1939, ended the hopes that the two sides might move towards war in total agreement. The German and Soviet foreign ministers met in Moscow to sign a treaty that guaranteed for the following ten years, that the two nations would settle any dispute

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<sup>153</sup> George Messersmith, "To Cordell Hull," 17 December 1940, ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

<sup>154</sup> George Messersmith, "To Cordell Hull," 13 May 1941, ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

amicably rather than by military action. Also, they made a plan to carve up Poland and the Baltic states of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania upon the completion of the war.

The Soviet agreement to the pact forced communist parties throughout the west to make changes in their policies to reflect the new direction. In matters connected to the coming war, Batista was moving closer to the United States all the time. By May of 1941, Batista told the U.S. ambassador that Cuba was ready “to enter into a far-reaching military alliance with the [the U.S.] for an indefinite period.”<sup>155</sup> The Cuban people also likely supported an alliance with the United States judging from the fanfare to which Batista returned after his 1939 meeting with Franklin Roosevelt and Cordell Hull and the response to Roosevelt’s famous “Last Call” speech calling for continental solidarity among the Cuban people. According to an observer, the speech could be heard in the streets of cities across the island and was very well received.<sup>156</sup> Because of President Batista’s increasingly close relationship with the United States, the PCC had to be very careful in how it dealt with foreign affairs. So as not to offend the U.S. and Batista, instead of calling for the support of the Soviet Union, and thereby Germany, the party called for Cuban neutrality in the war. This remained the policy of the party from the beginning of the war in September of 1939 until the middle of 1941 when Germany attacked the Soviet Union.

All the while, Batista made more gestures of support for the United States who, while still technically neutral, were obviously in the corner of Great Britain. This is evidenced by policies such as the Lend-Lease program enacted in March of 1941, nine months before the formal entrance of the U.S. into war. Even as it became more likely

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<sup>155</sup> Thomas, *Cuba : Or, the Pursuit of Freedom* 722.

<sup>156</sup> R. Hart Phillips, *Cuba, Island of Paradox* (New York,: McDowell Obolensky, 1959) 181.

that Cuba would enter the war on the American side, the PCC was still reluctant to criticize Batista. During the period while the Nazi-Soviet Pact persisted, the PCC did not make the same showing of accordance with Batista that it had previously, nor did it openly attack Batista either. The management of the Nazi-Soviet Pact like that of labor unrest revealed that the agreement between Batista and the Communist Party was surprisingly dynamic. While the Batista government and the communists promoted different policies concerning Cuban involvement in World War II, they were not in direct conflict with one another and the mutual support continued.

One fact that should not be forgotten is that the Nazi-Soviet Pact ended with the German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. Had the pact still been in existence in December of 1941, when the United States and then Cuba formally entered the war, it could have spelled the end of the marriage between Batista and the PCC. Batista was already being pushed to break off the relationship by the Havana newspapers in support of his government. As well he issued a decree that called for the elimination of all totalitarian parties. This decree did not define totalitarianism, and Batista commented that it was not aimed at the communists, but its existence still had implications for the party.<sup>157</sup> Fortunately, however, by 7 December 1941 the Soviets had declared war on the Axis powers, and the conflict of interest disappeared. Until the end of the war the Cuban Communists were among the most active supporters of the Allied effort.

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<sup>157</sup> George Messersmith, "To Cordell Hull," 2 March 1941, ed. Lester and Kesaris, *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, Central America, Cuba, 1930-1945*.

### **The Election of 1944 and *Auténtico*-Communist Relations**

In the election of 1944, the PCC remained loyal to Batista by supporting his candidate for president, Carlos Saladrigas, a former member of his presidential cabinet. The Communist Party, by then known as the *Partido Socialista Popular* (PSP), gave Batista more electoral support than it had ever before by giving his candidate 117,529 votes. This number represented nearly all of the party's membership, an estimated 120,000 members in 1944.<sup>158</sup> It was the rest of his coalition that failed him.

Grau ran a tireless campaign, touring the island as Batista had leading up to the election of 1940. Grau made outlandish campaign promises that had little chance of being fulfilled. For example, he once promised everyone “a pot of gold and an easy chair.” It mattered little that Grau's opponents labeled him “the divine gibberer.” His promises for a return to the revolutionary government he led in 1934 drew many of Batista's partisans away from the coalition.<sup>159</sup> The most notable was the the *Partido Republicana*. As the election approached, the *Partido Republicano Demócrata* split in two over Batista's refusal to support their candidate. The *Partido Demócrata* remained in the Batista camp, and the *Partido Republicana* joined Grau. The other members of Batista's coalition, the *Liberales* and the ABC, also experienced dwindling numbers in response to Grau's political onslaught. Had Saladrigas won, Batista would have likely

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<sup>158</sup> José D. Cabús, *Batista, Pensamiento Y Acción* (Havana: Prensa Indoamericana, 1944) 141.

<sup>159</sup> Thomas, *Cuba : Or, the Pursuit of Freedom* 735.

remained a force in Cuban politics. However, Grau's victory by over 400,000 votes effectively ended Batista's first regime.<sup>160</sup>

Grau's victory caused a stir in the Communist Party. Due to their opposition to the *Auténticos* in previous elections, they feared retribution. Instead, the opposite happened. Shortly after Grau assumed office a deal was struck between the two groups. In exchange for allowing Lázaro Peña to retain his position atop the CTC, the PSP gave its support to Grau. This was, however, a short-lived arrangement. It would collapse over conflicts between the communists and *Auténticos* in the CTC. By early 1947, Grau called for the *Auténticos* in the CTC to oppose the reelection of Lázaro Peña as secretary-general at its approaching congress. This delayed the congress and allowed for tensions to grow until just before it was to start, when communists and *Auténticos* were involved in gunfights. The violence brought Carlos Prío Socorrás, Grau's Minister of Labor, to delay the congress indefinitely. When the *Auténtico* leadership decided upon a time for a new congress, the communists refused. The *Auténtico*-led congress took place without any communist representation and elected its own secretary-general and committees. As well, the communists held their own national meeting, reelecting Lázaro Peña as the head of the CTC. The schism in the labor movement left Cuba with two general unions, and most of the important labor federations undecided as to which they should join. It dramatically decreased communist influence and was a first step toward the total expulsion of the party from leadership in the labor movement.

The next phase in the drive to banish the communists from power positions came in the summer of 1947. In July, communist stevedores on the Havana docks went on

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<sup>160</sup> Cabús, *Batista, Pensamiento Y Acción* 141-43.



strike over working conditions and low pay. On 17 July, the government sent troops to quell the disturbance. The strikers opposed the troops with tenacity. Nearly two weeks later, Prío, in efforts to end the unrest from above, took the CTC headquarters from Lázaro Peña by force and installed *Auténtico* unionists. He also declared the *Auténtico* union the only legal one. By the autumn of 1947, most of the major federations joined the anti-communist side. With this act, the government gained control of the labor movement, and the communists were again left politically isolated. By May 1949, Eusebio Mujal would be in control of the CTC, and it would become a lapdog for *Auténtico* corruption. The Communist Party would not return to its position of prestige until Fidel Castro openly declared his communist intentions in 1961.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Thomas, *Cuba : Or, the Pursuit of Freedom* 753-74.

## **Conclusions**

A close examination of Batista's relationship with the communists reveals that, through its evolution, Fulgencio Batista showed many character traits that he supposedly lacked. In explaining how the two unlikely comrades came together, Batista's immense political skill came to light. Beginning before the Sergeants' Revolt of 1933, Batista made difficult coalitions with former and future enemies. The first Grau government is a prime example. The cooperation between the reformist students and the military was not expected, but Batista made it work until he consolidated his power enough so as to find a more comfortable alliance. His dealings with the Cuban presidents and Congress from 1934 until 1939 further exposed his political savvy. During this period he not only kept the opposition in check, but he also set the stage for his own run at the presidency by creating the coalition in which the communists were an integral part. These points suggest Batista did not have Cuban politics tightly in his grip, nor did he rule as an autocrat as many have claimed, but as an intermediary between opposing factions. Batista was as much a powerbroker as he was a dictator.

This work also sought to bring to light Batista's career as a social reformer. In analyzing the factors that made possible the Batista-Communist pact, it became clear that though his enemies claim Batista was an elitist, his record of reform showed that he actually implemented some of the 1933 reforms. Indeed, he saw himself as the inheritor of the goals of 1933, and as such, he continued the most far-reaching efforts of Grau's

revolutionary government, which gave way to the Triennial Plan of 1937 and culminated in the Constitution of 1940.

Finally, this work sought to discard the image of Batista as a puppet of U.S. policy. This is a theme that comes up time and time again in the historiography. There is no doubt that the U.S. continued to play a large role in Cuban politics, but during his first regime, Batista continually acted as a thorn in the side of Cuba's northern neighbor. He sought to expand the economic and political independence of his nation, but was hindered by the realities of an economy that was based on trade with the United States.<sup>162</sup> Batista nevertheless challenged American policy. He supported legislation that created strict employment laws, taking jobs away from Americans in Cuba. His reformist streak and close association with Lázaro Cárdenas of Mexico worried many that he might have leftist tendencies. These apprehensions were only intensified by his relationship with the Communist Party, but Batista continued on to the presidency with the communists in his corner.

Some scholars have called for an in-depth study of the Batista-Communist relationship so as to understand its daily mechanisms. This is a contribution to that project. While so much of the historical record is locked away in vaults closely guarded by the Castro government, such a study might not be possible. Rather, this work strives to contribute to a greater understanding of the first Batista era in Cuba by exhibiting the fullness of the leader beyond the stock character of the reactionary military dictator that has been propagated by so many.

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<sup>162</sup> Argote-Freyre, preface, xi.

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